

New Forest Notes - January 1999

CLEARING THE FOREST'S EXOTIC TREES

Part of the European grant "Life" money is being spent by the Forestry Commission in ridding the Open Forest woodland of invasive exotic trees. The process has received a great deal of publicity, particularly on television, and this was presumably instigated by the Forestry Commission as a pre-emptive defensive measure. From the Commission's point of view, one of the difficulties is that, to the uninformed observer, they appear to be going about cutting down oak trees at random ! What in fact is being done is the removal of Turkey oak - a non-native and highly invasive tree which has been spreading throughout the Ancient Ornamental woodland, especially in the Lyndhurst area. Its timber is said to be virtually useless and, just after I have cut down one on my own land and converted it to logs, I am told that it makes extremely poor firewood. Few local people are likely to mourn the passing of the Turkey oak in the New Forest. Its departure from woodland of beautiful English oaks will hardly be noticed after a few months. Similarly, the projected onslaught on sycamore (rampant in Matley and Denny Woods for example) will probably be no more controversial, but after that things become more difficult.

The Commission has plans to reduce (but not eliminate) sweet chestnut - an attractive tree beloved of pigs, visitors and rural crafts enthusiasts alike. It may be an alien in strict scientific terms, but it has a long history in the New Forest. Some people will remember the beautiful and massive chestnuts planted in Godshill Inclosure in 1810 and felled a few years ago. There are still fine ancient trees of this species in such places as Hasley. The tree was (and is) an important source of hand made fencing materials and structural timbers made from it were claimed to be repellent to spiders and thus free of cobwebs. It is used in a number of ancient buildings in and around the Forest including, it is said, the roof of Downton church. Since it does not spread rapidly, the justification for its removal seems small. When public money becomes available on a large scale, the temptation to spend it is irresistible and we could easily end up with a Forest so tidy and ethnically pure that it loses much of its character. With the limited funds so far issued, the danger is not very great, but the risk will become very real if there are repeated injections of "Life" money.

After sweet chestnut come the almost totally non-invasive trees, most of which are the remnants of ornamental planting in the 1880s. Such landscape gardening would, rightly, be deplored today, but these few clumps record an important chapter in the Forest's history and should be left alone - including any minor natural regeneration within their limits. Trees in this category include red oaks, lime, the occasional horse chestnut and so on. The best places to find them are Matley, Denny, off the Bolderwood Road and in a place west of Fritham known to this day as "Fancy Trees" after the planting which took place there.

The planting of exotics started on a large scale in 1884 under the direction of the then Deputy Surveyor, Gerald Lascelles. It quickly became the source of an intense conflict with the Verderers' Court. Planting continued until at least 1887 and, despite strong legal advice to the Verderers that the Crown should be challenged in the courts, this was one occasion on which there was no litigation. The problem seems to have been that the Verderers could not agree amongst themselves. So far as I can see, those who objected did so not on aesthetic grounds, but on the technical loss of grazing. By

1888 the Verderers had abandoned this line of attack in favour of some other more promising ones. In the meantime the agisters had been instructed to keep records of tree planting (type, numbers and location). Their returns show many hundreds of trees planted over eighteen or so sites within the Ancient Ornamental woods. Today only a few interesting specimens and groups remain and I believe that most people would like to see them left alone. To be fair to the Forestry Commission, they have acknowledged that such historic trees have a place in the Forest, but they have stopped short of giving a categorical assurance that they will not be touched.

BRIDGE PROBLEMS

A very serious and unexpected problem relating to bridges has emerged as a result of a paper brought to the December Verderers' Court by the Deputy Surveyor. The Forestry Commission has apparently reassessed its obligation to protect the public against risks of injury resulting from the use of defective bridges in the Forest. This, it seems, is because of the present litigious state of society. Until now, when one found a broken plank in a bridge, custom required that a stick was placed vertically in the hole to warn other riders or pedestrians. That, and a grumble to Queen's House, was good enough. Everyone walked or rode round the hole until it was put right. Now, in order to discharge its perceived duty of care, the Commission proposes to close any defective bridge immediately, irrespective of the havoc this will cause. What constitutes "unsafe" is not explained by the Commission. Is a horse bridge unsafe because a section of handrail is missing for example? Huge numbers of bridges throughout the Forest have such minor defects while remaining perfectly useable with care. On the other hand, there are many bridges which are quite lethal to riders because their plank surfaces have never been tarred and gritted as good construction practice requires. When they are wet they become like ice rinks under horses' shoes. In the past the Commission has, at least since Deputy Surveyors gave up hunting, been reluctant to tackle this very real danger. Are we now to see the closure of every untarred plank bridge, every causeway with an embryo clay hole, and every culvert which might be suspect? No very satisfactory answers were forthcoming at the Court (engineers are "reporting"), but if this is intended, the resulting chaos will be totally unacceptable.

The problem has been highlighted in a letter from the Deputy Surveyor to the Commoners Defence Association relating to the bridges and causeway leading from Lovely Hill (otherwise Furzey Brow) to the south west, across the Bishop's Dyke. I am told that this vital thoroughfare has the curious and unrecorded placename "Pudney Bridges". The Commission has closed it on safety grounds. It is one of the many crossings in the Forest for which there is no practical alternative. Because of the railway and the extensive bog system which the passage bridges, long and complicated diversions are necessary to circumvent the closure. The Deputy Surveyor claims that to replace it with a safe modern bridge system will result in the building of an eyesore - a curious view, which I suggested to him does not demonstrate much confidence in his organisation's skills in design and construction. So far as I can see from the correspondence, the Forestry Commission would like to dispose of Pudney Bridges permanently and in support of this proposition the Deputy Surveyor adduces some historical argument. He says, correctly, that the passage does not appear on Richardson, King and Driver's survey of 1787, but from this he comes to the odd conclusion that it has "a history much shorter than one hundred years". In fact it is shown on the first edition Six Inch

Ordnance Survey map, surveyed in 1869 and so clearly dates back more than one hundred and thirty years. These interesting bits of history are, of course, quite irrelevant. If we are to take a lack of antiquity as being sufficient justification for the closure of bridges, a good proportion of the Forest's trackway system might be shut down overnight.

If the Forestry Commission is really worried about its public liability in respect of defective bridges, it will have to spend a lot more money instituting rapid and thorough maintenance. Haphazard closure with long delays before repair is simply not an acceptable alternative.

NEW FOREST MUSEUM

Last month's news that the New Forest Ninth Centenary Trust has bought out the lessees who operated the commercial visitor displays within the New Forest Museum should be widely welcomed in the Forest. The company which ran the venture in fact occupied all but a couple of rooms in the Museum and the operation was never greatly loved in the Forest. Opinions varied from "a lost opportunity" to complaints of "a superficial tourist show adding to Lyndhurst's traffic problems". From the fact that it appears to have become less profitable in recent times, one might suppose that even the visiting public was not entirely happy.

The two rooms which had been retained by the Trust were used well below their potential until, a few years ago, Jude James was given the task of developing them. The result has been a very useful, but cramped, study centre, library and meeting room. A body of enthusiastic volunteer support has also been built up. Now, with effective control of the whole premises in the Trust's hands, there is a renewed opportunity to develop a real New Forest Museum such as was dreamed of in the 1970s.

The old-fashioned and still fairly general idea of a museum is a gallery filled with specimens in glass cases and not much else. That is about the last thing the Forest needs. The success of any modern museum depends upon its staff and the services it provides. The latter include identification and conservation of finds, library facilities, storage, lecture programmes, advice in the field and so on. How far towards achieving all these goals it will be possible for the Trust to go remains to be seen. No doubt the hard economic facts of life may dictate something of a compromise between the present tourist trap and the Forest researcher's view of the ideal. Something is going to have to pay staff salaries and the presumably considerable costs of maintaining a large and very fine building. Anyhow, this is a golden opportunity to make a success of the museum. Perhaps it could become a sort of demilitarised zone where the Forest's warring factions can meet with a common purpose, forgetting to call each other greedy commoners, interfering townies, national park makers or philistine foresters. On the other hand, that might just be a little too optimistic a hope for the New Year.