

## **NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2005**

### **Restoring Turf Hill**

Grumbling about the Forestry Commission is as much a New Forest tradition as is complaining about the weather on a national scale. It is a sin which I have occasionally committed myself, so it is all the more welcome when there is an opportunity to record a good job well done by the Commission. That is the case at Turf Hill.

In the 1950s when the Verderers Inclosures were being planned, there was a proposal to take in Mallard Wood on the south side of the A 35 between Lyndhurst and Ashurst. The area threatened was partly Ancient Ornamental Woodland and already the amenity and conservation lobbies were becoming restive at the Commission's treatment of the New Forest. At the last moment, therefore, the Mallard Wood proposal was deleted and for it was substituted the inclosure of heathland on the extreme northern edge of the Forest at Turf Hill. Until about fifteen years earlier, the land had been the explosives research range known as ARD Millersford and the great earth mounds which mark the sites of the bulldozed blast-protected laboratories still dominated the skyline. In those days the Forestry Commission had them on its maps as burial mounds which I suppose in a sense they were.

The land was duly fenced-in and deep-ploughed in 1967. The ploughing technique employed in the Verderers' Inclosures was to provide a severe corrugated profile to the land surface which was presumably convenient for planting and conducive to good drainage. On certain soils it also proved almost indestructible by natural forces of erosion. A variety of conifers was used, but chiefly Scots pine, Corsican pine and Monterey pine. The few small areas of Douglas fir did not grow well and the plantation generally seemed to sulk for some years. It was then fertilized from the air and I remember watching this remarkable aerial circus when returning home from work one day.

In the decade or so which followed, Turf Hill started to flourish, becoming a dominant feature in the landscape and providing a limited screen, at least close-to, for the 400kv powerline to the north. Then came the great storm of 1990 which devastated a large area on the hill itself and on the slopes of Deadman Bottom. By degrees the fallen timber was cleared off and in the next few years the Commission began tinkering with the restoration of the ridge and furrow profile. Some good work was done, but on a very small scale. Almost immediately the Verderers began pressing for the main areas of corrugation to be levelled out as the Forestry Commission had by this stage indicated that the vacant spaces would not be replanted. A decision to relinquish the entire inclosure was still some years ahead. Levelling is essential on areas to be returned to grazing, not least for safety reasons. It is impossible to ride a horse over the rutted surfaces.

Fifteen years of prevarication followed the 1990 storm. It was said that total restoration work was too difficult, that there was no money to do it, that English Nature would not allow it and that heather had reappeared so the corrugations could not now be disturbed.

Finally it was said that the area was full of reptiles which must not be evicted. Probably the only really genuine excuse was a lack of money and will.

Over the last few years a dense growth of birch established itself on the site, threatening to choke the re-emergent heathland and, in 2004, the Forestry Commission finally agreed to tackle the problem once and for all. The whole area was burnt last winter and in May two huge tracked excavators moved in, tearing out the remaining vegetation which was pushed up into windrows. The underlying ruts were then levelled. Once the windrows had dried, they were heaped up and burnt. The work continued for weeks and is now (late June) completed. For the present and no doubt for some months to come, the heath looks like a well-tilled arable field, but on past experience it will be well on the way to re-establishing heather by this time next year, while in five years it should be indistinguishable from the heath destroyed in the 1960s. Together with Markway and Dur Hill Inclosures, it is perhaps the crowning achievement of the Forestry Commission's heathland restoration activities in the New Forest and a credit to both its staff and the skill of the contractors involved.

### **Markway compromise**

Last month a rather messy compromise was reached over the long-running Markway Lawn dispute – at least I suppose one can just about call it a compromise where one party holds a gun to the other's head and demands acceptance of its terms. It will be remembered that at Markway one of the most important grazing lawns on the Forest has been ruined by permanent inundation resulting from a blocked stream channel, piles of logs thrown in by visitors creating what the conservationists call their prized "debris dams" and by a steadfast opposition to any maintenance works because the destroyed pasture is ecologically interesting.

What has now been agreed is that the Forestry Commission will clear some weed which is blocking those bits of stream channel which are still visible downstream from Markway Bridge. They will also open up a channel to clear or bypass the blockage below the bridge and they will maintain these works, but only for three years. Beyond that they do no more than undertake to "consider" requests for ongoing maintenance.

These rather vague and short-term concessions have been bought at a high price. Upstream of the bridge, the free-flowing channel from Mill Lawn will be blocked and the water diverted to the original course further to the west. The present channel will be retained to operate as a sort of overflow in flood times, blocked here and there with debris. A very pleasant stream course will thus be converted to a muddy backwater and the western alignment will succeed it. That will be partially cleared of trees and leaf mould and allowed to develop naturally. The view of the experts is that this will limit the discharge of stream-blocking gravel onto Markway Lawn and allow the watercourse there to become self-maintaining. Some commoners at the site meeting, on the other hand, believe that the new channel will simply create a second Markway swamp further upstream, that the lower parts of Mill Lawn will be threatened and that we will be rather worse off than we started once the three year maintenance period expires. It is a depressing result, but the Forestry Commission

simply issued an ultimatum to the Verderers along the lines of: “ Take what is offered now or get nothing at all”. I suppose that three years of improvement is worth something, but it falls far short of the long term solution for which everyone had hoped. There is a lot of talk in conservation circles about the key role in the maintenance of the Forest played by the commoners’ animals. That talk is seldom translated into action when the wildlife lobby is faced with requests for reasonable maintenance of important grazing areas. It would have been a simple matter for English Nature and the Forestry Commission to have given an assurance that they both recognize Markway as a crucial grazing lawn and that they will support its future maintenance as such. It may be thought highly significant that neither is prepared to do so.

The Verderers had told the Commission that they would not approve further Life III stream blocking exercises until there was a solution of the Markway problem. Having secured their “solution”, the Court has no alternative but to re-commence its consideration of new schemes as they are brought forward.

### **Progress of the campsite applications**

Optimistic people in the Forest might have assumed that the long silence over the development proposals for Hollands Wood and Roundhill campsites meant that the Forestry Commission had quietly backed-off and that the threat was thus lifted. I am afraid they are in for a disappointment. Certainly the planning application is in abeyance while English Nature decides whether to confirm or withdraw its “holding objection”. To make that decision it apparently needs more information. I find that very difficult to understand. Large amounts of detailed conservation material have already been provided by the Forestry Commission. One might also suppose that English Nature, with offices in the Forest for nearly half a century, would have a fair knowledge of the sites and would be able to make up its mind from its own resources, but perhaps politics are getting in the way. We apparently need the results of a dreadful process under the Habitats Regulations 1994 called an “appropriate assessment”. That assessment of the Forestry Commission’s proposals is now underway and it might be supposed that it would be conducted by some impartial expert far removed from the Forestry Commission and from Forest intrigues. In fact the judgement is to be made by an officer of the Forestry Commission, assisted in his deliberations by the Verderers. I am assured that the personal integrity of the officer concerned is such that his impartiality is beyond question, but there may be some difficulty in explaining this to the Forest if he decides that the camps will have no effect on wildlife and that the plans for developing them can go ahead. The assessment process is further complicated by the fact only one party – Forest Enterprise/ Forest Holidays - seems to have a right to address those sitting in judgement. It may be that the latter will invite such opposing representations, but so far as I can see that is simply a concession. The process is, to put it mildly, curious. Finally, and most extraordinary of all, the assessment is actually prepared in draft by the applicant/developer (Forest Holidays) and presented to the judges with the invitation that they should adopt it ! I am told that this is standard practice.

I suppose there must be some sort of obscure legal logic to all of this, but to the man in the street it looks like a process somewhat weighted in favour of the developer. I make no comment, of course, upon the evidence which will lead to the assessment. That information is not available at present and must be approached by all concerned with open minds.

Looking to the future and if the assessment should be in favour of Forest Holidays, the matter then goes to the planners who will consider other, non-wildlife, aspects of the application. These may include, traffic, disturbance, effects on agriculture, landscape, archaeology, pollution, and so on. The Verderers have already refused consent, but if the planners give permission, the Court will stand alone against the Forestry Commission and can expect to come under intense pressure to withdraw. We have a long way to go yet.

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