

NEW FOREST NOTES JULY 2007

Tuberculosis in the Forest

For a long time past I have been trying, with no success at all, to discover DEFRA's plan of action in the event of there being an outbreak of bovine tuberculosis among the cattle on the Forest's common lands. Would they, for example, impose movement restrictions on the entire Forest? Would they order off all the cattle or would they confine control measures to specific districts? Even the intervention of my MP, Desmond Swayne, failed to elicit anything more than an extremely vague and unhelpful response from the department. I am inclined to think that the reply was not a deliberate attempt to be unhelpful, but an admission that there is no plan at all! With tuberculosis raging through many herds in the West Country, it may well be only a matter of time before the disease becomes firmly established here. Badger populations in the Forest area are very high and if they become infected (perhaps they already are), we could be about to witness the decimation of cattle farming in the New Forest.

Until last month I rather got the feeling that whenever I raised the subject of bovine tuberculosis, there was a distinct lack of interest and a belief that the risk was too theoretical to worry about. Then, on 23rd May, the Clerk to the Verderers issued an urgent warning to cattle owners that a heifer belonging to a practising commoner had tested positive to TB. A post slaughter examination showed that the animal was indeed infected.

Few more details have been made public, but it is known that the infected animal was part of a herd running in the north west of the Forest and that all animals belonging to it have had to be removed from the common grazing for further tests. No doubt DEFRA will investigate the origin and management of that reactor. If more cases are found, testing will be expanded to include other herds which mixed with the potentially infected stock and we could be on the verge of a very unpleasant slippery slope. On the positive side, I am told that a spread of infection under Open Forest conditions is much less likely than within the confines of a farm.

Ashley Lodge and the Bumsteads

Last month I received an email from a lady in Germany researching the history of her late husband's family. Such enquiries are quite common, but this one stood out because it came from a Mrs. Bumstead and that is a name which will forever be associated with the now vanished Ashley Lodge. The Bumsteads were keepers there from near the middle of the 18th Century, right through to the last decade of the 19th – a total of 130 years. They were recorded by Gerald Lascelles in his "Thirty Five Years in the New Forest". He says that the last Bumstead in Crown service died in about 1890 and describes him as possessing the best qualities of a New Forest Keeper, but also as being of "abnormal proportions". After 1891, there was still a George Bumstead in private service as a gamekeeper in the parish of Lyndhurst and it would be interesting to know more of him. Unfortunately, the fine old lodge

and its numerous outbuildings and fields lasted only another fifty years before being wrecked by bombing on the Ashley Range.

My correspondent was also interested in a cottage at New Grounds (Godshill) which had been acquired by Sophia Bumstead, born in 1806 at Ashley Lodge and daughter of John, the second keeper in line. She possessed the cottage in 1858, because it is recorded in the register of claims to common rights, although it was then let. Although one and a half miles distant from the Lodge, this cottage could have been described as “next door”, because no other houses intervened – just a lonely expanse of undulating heath. Unfortunately I had to give Mrs. Bumstead the rather sad news that the cottage was recently demolished and a modern house built elsewhere on the site.

New Forest picture Exhibition

Another and rather more difficult task of detection reached me from the other end of the Forest during June. The St.Barbe Museum and Art Gallery in Lymington is to hold an exhibition of New Forest paintings later this summer, concentrating on the work of a handful of well-known artists. The popularity of such works is increasing all the time, as witness the huge prices now commanded by the works of Golden Short and his contemporaries. Many of these pictures are instantly recognisable as being New Forest landscape, but it was surprisingly rare for the artist to record the exact location in which his or her pictures were made. A century or so of changing vegetation and development has made the task of precise identification extremely difficult. Accordingly, the curator of St.Barbe sent me prints of several of the items to be included in the exhibition, together with tentative suggestions as to which parts of the Forest they depicted and a request for further information. I was able to make some suggestions, particularly as to a most beautiful Golden Short, which is almost certainly of the view north from the Ridge at Lyndhurst, looking over Longwater. That was relatively easy, but one picture presented a particularly difficult and intriguing problem. It is by Patrick Naysmith (an artist of whom I know nothing) and is dated 1815. It is described simply as “View in the New Forest near Lyndhurst”. It is a beautiful painting, oil on canvas, but certainly not one which looks very much like the New Forest. It shows some squatters’ cottages, a wide driftway apparently comprising a strip of Open Forest, enclosed farmland and a distinctive hill in the background. Its interpretation depends entirely on how one defines “near Lyndhurst”. Does it mean five miles or five hundred yards ? Anyhow, after a lot of wandering about the Forest and rummaging through ancient maps, my best guess is that it is of Parkhill Lawn off the Beaulieu Road at Lyndhurst. If it is, it is also clear that the artist took a good many liberties with the background and some detail. It will be interesting to see if the public can come up with any better suggestions when the exhibition opens on 4th August. It runs to 13th October, Mon – Sat, 10am – 4pm.

The Forestry Commission’s management plan

The Forestry Commission is just starting a revision of its management plan for the New Forest. In the old days such plans were crucial documents upon which the life or death of huge areas of beautiful old woodland depended. They were prepared and implemented in

complete secrecy. All that came to an end with the great battles of 1968-1971 and today the management plan is little more than a collection of platitudes intended for public consumption. All the same, it does give indications of how Forestry Commission thinking is developing and changing. The copies now circulating are a sort of preliminary draft, in advance of formal consultation later in the year. Much of what they contain is entirely inoffensive. There are a few worrying indications of yet more attempts to boost recreational pressure on the Forest and there are some notable omissions. As one of my Verderer colleagues rightly pointed out, in twenty five pages there is hardly a mention of the Verderers' Court, perhaps reflecting the longstanding irritation of the Forestry Commission that the Verderers should be concerned in management at all, let alone with clear protective policies, frequently in conflict with the development ambitions of Queen's House. Still, to be fair, this is only a first draft and some of the more abrasive corners may be knocked off it during the consultation process.

The timing of the management plan review is interesting. I am sure that the Commission will say that it is dictated entirely by the expiration of its predecessor, but it is going to pre-empt the national park plan by a year or so. We are assured that the Commission is working closely with its colleagues in the park authority to "ensure that our plan is compatible with national park objectives". That, of course, is a legal requirement, but I am not at all sure that it should give us great confidence in the value of the eventual plan or of its benefit to the New Forest.

An end to the Forest's drainage

In March I described the Forest's attempts to raise money from the National Lottery and some of the possible consequences of that application. Now, like a lot of other people, I have been struggling with a Forestry Commission document which foreshadows the end of man-made drainage in the New Forest. It lists one hundred and thirty seven areas of drainage which the Commission would like to modify – perhaps destroy is a better word in many cases. What proportion of the whole this represents, I do not know, but it must go a long way towards removing those drains made to improve the Commoners' grazing land from 1851 to the 1970s. The theory is that such drainage is now unacceptable because, in Natural England's opinion, it renders the condition of the land "unfavourable" for its purposes. The fact that it is eminently favourable for the purposes of the Commoners seems to worry no-one. In some cases the proposals are for no more than a couple of heather bales in a hole: in others entire river systems are to be diverted. I imagine that the pressure is being applied at this time in the hope of securing a large share of the anticipated lottery riches. Actually, I am a little surprised that the lottery should fund such work, irrespective of its merits or lack of them. A member of the Commoners' Defence committee tells me that such money is not usually made available where public funding can be obtained from other sources. Large fortunes of public money have already been spent on stream and drain filling. Apparently the CDA has been given a presentation on the subject by the Park's "project development officer".

What I find so disturbing about this process is the largely unquestioned assumption that wrecking man-made drainage systems is invariably a good thing. Certainly there are a few ugly or dangerous and eroding drains which need attention. But Forest drainage also serves a valuable purpose in providing good lawn grazing for ponies and cattle. They also have their place, alongside obscure bog plants and invertebrates. No-one is prepared to put enough money into resolving the problems which really damage the Forest – the mountains of litter left by visitors, the totally inadequate and ineffective policing of recreation pressures, traffic noise, extraction damage, and so on. Drain filling is an easy target and the defenders of Forest agriculture are a lot less influential than they once were.

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