

New Forest Notes - July 1990

Court of Swainmote

The Forest's administration is littered with deliciously archaic names of which the title of the Swainmote court is a good example. In fact it is a surprisingly modern institution dating in its present form from 1949. It is the judicial committee of the Court of Verderers charged with trying cases arising out of the Verderers' byelaws — those regulations designed chiefly to ensure the health, welfare and good breeding standards of Forest animals. From 1877, through the reconstitution of the Court in 1949 and up to 1980, the court met regularly every few months to try and punish those who offended against the byelaws.

Then something remarkable happened. As though by divine intervention, offences against the byelaws came to an abrupt halt, or so it seemed, and the court has not heard a single case for ten years. Of course such a reformed lion was in fact an illusion. What really happened was that through some adroit legal representation, various defendants in the swainmote succeeded in making the Verderers look rather foolish back in 1980. The Verderers then, after some abortive civil proceedings, quietly abandoned the swainmote and there has since arisen the belief that if you flout the byelaws discreetly, you may flout them with impunity. It must be said that the vast majority of New Forest Commoners play by the rules. They pay their marking fees more or less on time, keep their bulls and unregistered stallions off the Forest, and do not allow their ponies to degenerate into walking skeletons. A tiny minority adopts contrary policies and is the proper target of the swainmote,

Part of the Verderers' embarrassment in 1980 was due to technical defects in the byelaws and these led to protracted negotiations with the Forestry Commission and Ministry of Agriculture for a revision. Now, at last, that revision has been approved and came into force on July 1st, The Verderers have new teeth and only their inclination to use them remains to be tested.

Camping problems

Over the years, the village of Fritham has had to take more than its share of invasions. Its abandoned airfield is one of the Forest's major "honeypot" tourist sites and several years ago it became the resting place of a hippy convoy dislodged from Salisbury Plain. It is also blessed with no less than four major ramp sites, all of which are due for re-design or relocation under the New Forest Review recommendations of 1987. These particular recommendations are among those accepted by the government in March.

At the Spring Bank Holiday, one of the camp sites (North Bentley) inflicted further pressure on near-by householders when a barrier gate was left open allowing un-authorised camping to spill over onto the adjoining area of Forest. Over 80 tents and vans penetrated the car-free zone and established pitches up against private farmland and gardens. More than a dozen camp fires were lit (contrary to Forestry Commission byelaws), one particularly large inferno being within yards of a bay barn. Finally and most unpleasantly, the adjoining fields were treated as a latrine leaving the farmer to bury the accumulated filth of the holiday.

The trouble was eventually brought under control and has since been investigated by the Commission, but it highlights the ever-present conflict between intense recreational use and the reasonable comfort of residents and farmers. Over the years there have been similar problems at Dilton, Hinchleslea and Brockenhurst. At least the hard-pressed Fritham residents are due for some relief as North Bentley, always a controversial site, is due to close for good under the Review recommendations.

Pound Bottom Dump

Several years ago, a large refuse tip was opened immediately adjoining the Forest between Bramshaw Telegraph and Hale. The Pound Bottom Tip as it is called, is fed daily by a fleet of heavy lorries carrying skips. All access to the site is across the Forest and from the start there were complaints of large quantities of litter and building refuse fouling the verges of the B3078 from Cadnam — materials which were alleged to have fallen or blown from the lorries on this exposed road. I have several times travelled behind dump lorries shedding materials including polythene sheeting and, on one occasion, a Wellington boot. In recent times there has been rather more success in controlling this litter rain as drivers have been required to sheet their loads.

However, the dump is scarcely a pleasant neighbour for the Forest. In summer, sewage sludge is spread on the land surrounding it, causing, when the east wind blows, a sickening stench across the north of the Forest. This often reaches almost as far as Godshill and can last for weeks at a time. Now, to add to the delights of the site, application has been made for the removal of one-and-a-quarter million tons of sand over a thirteen year period. The resulting hole will be filled with waste. Perhaps at the end of that time there will be a further application. The site is not in the control of either the New Forest District Council or the Hampshire County Council as it is just over the Wiltshire boundary. It demonstrates just how vulnerable the New Forest is to insensitive decisions by the planning authorities.

Mushrooms

Mushroom hunter/connoisseurs, will have noted the remarkably early arrival of both the field and Forest varieties this year. The little brown speckled Forest mushrooms seldom make an appearance in any numbers before August or September, but this year they are almost two months early. I have vivid childhood memories of early morning mushroom hunts in the Forest, trying to beat to the quarry the evacuees housed in the old airfield huts at Stoney Cross. In those days the crops seemed to be immense compared to the few poor specimens of some recent years. I had quite begun to believe that The passage of years had exaggerated the contents of those baskets in the memory. Then, In September of last year, I came upon a Forest track carpeted with the most abundant spread of mushrooms I have seen for .25 years, quite confirming those early recollections. After filling every available pocket and container I had about me, far more remained than I could carry away. The location of the site will, of course, remain a secret, although I suspect the passage of a few more decades may be required before such bounty is repeated.

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