

New Forest Notes – July 1992

Water from the Forest

While weather forecasters talk of the worst shortage in decades, the New Forest is being given a fascinating reminder of its past role as a supplier of water to bordering households and farmers. Today we are so used to turning on a tap or expecting a field trough to fill automatically, that we forget that this form of supply is really of a very recent origin. In fact, some parts of the Forest did not receive a main supply until after the last war. Before that, fortunate people relied upon wells in their own ground, but many of the smaller cottagers and most farm animals were dependant on the Forest. Sometimes water taken from streams, but there also existed, chiefly for domestic use, large numbers of shallow wells which collected and clarified the flow from springs and seepage points on the hillsides. Except in a few cases where such wells continue to serve Forest livestock, they have been largely forgotten. The Forestry Commission has for some time been engaged in a programme of restoration of Forest wells through the work of its craftsman Peter Brown of Frogham. The Commissions work is the more creditable because it has no obvious commercial or tourism advantages and it is being undertaken to a high standard. Not only are the wells and springs being renovated, but traditional hardwood post and rail fencing has been provided where the size or depth of the well demands it. Examples of wells already restored by Peter Brown can be seen at Hincheslea, Eyeworth and High Corner where a particularly interesting site has been found. One of the most common methods of well building was to sink a wooden barrel in the ground over the water source and, because of the waterlogged nature of the sites, many of these barrels have survived for generations. The High Corner barrel is unusual because of its immense size. Another method of construction was to form a well lining of thick oak planks around a spring. Such a source (off the Forest) served my own house and still feeds a farm water trough. In rare instances, conventional brick lined wells were built on the Forest and sometimes concrete lined collecting chambers fed nearby houses by gravity through underground pipes. Such a system supplied part of Eyeworth from near Hiscocks hill and the old pipe torn out by drainage work some years ago can still be seen. For the farmer of course, Forest water was even more vital. A few valuable fields have their own springs, but most livestock relied totally upon the Forest and those animals which did not live out any way were turned onto the common twice a day for water. This gave an extra importance to the possession of common rights. I suspect that the produce of very few of these old wells would now be classified as fit for human consumption, but they remain an attractive and interesting relic of the past and well worth preserving.

Deer Problems

Considering that deer were originally the main reason for the New Forests existence, it is surprising how little they figure in Forest affairs today. There is, of course, the continuing row

over hunting, and most farmers in the area have to put up with a good deal of crop damage, but deer are no longer the subject of such intense as they have often been in the past. My own problems with deer stem not from the usual Forest troublemakers - the fallow, but from the smaller roe. These deer which I had always thought of as solitary or as going about in pairs, seem to have taken a fancy to my fields just off the Forests northern border. On one day last winter I counted twelve in an area of about three acres. However, like most people in the Forest, I put up with the damage for the pleasure of seeing them about. Last month these uninvited visitors cost me rather more than a few mouthfuls of grass. After an unpleasant accident several years ago in which a roe kid, hidden by its mother in my hay field, was killed by the cutter, I now take the precaution of walking through the crop just prior to cutting. This year, several roe emerged and ran off during the ore-cutting walk, one doe leaving with considerable reluctance. I carefully noted the spot from which she had risen and, on going up to it, I could hear a sound like the squeaking of mice. There in the long grass were two tiny kids, probably only hours old and quite incapable of escaping through the surrounding jungle. The standard advice to holiday makers "if you find a baby deer, don't touch it or the mother will reject it" was of course, in my mind. With the contractor due in half an hour, there was really no alternative but to abandon half an acre of standing grass at the top of the field at considerable cost. Next year my field is going to have to be well disturbed for some days before cutting.

Death by Misadventure?

Anyone concerned with commonable animals must learn to tolerate the sight of foals slaughtered by drivers on the Forests roads. Such killing is the daily price of speed and stupidity so that we have come to regard it in the Forest as quite normal. Another and far more natural form of foal killing, on the other hand, will no doubt seem shocking to outsiders. It is the killing of foals by stallions, and last month such a death was occurred in Brockenhurst. It was, unusually, carried out in front of human witnesses. This attack followed the classic pattern of the foal being gripped by the neck and in the air before being trampled on. Exactly why such attacks occur remains uncertain, but they are by no means uncommon. It is also likely that many unexplained and unwitnessed foal deaths are attributable to stallion violence. Various suggested explanations from experienced commoners seem to me unconvincing. However, Stephanie Tyler's masterly report on New Forest pony behaviour in the 1960s suggests that attacks that attacks are far more frequent from stallions turned out in the spring rather than those which run continually on the Forest. She noted six killings, several injuries and five disappearances of foals in the territories of three stallions in one summer. Apart from the propensity of in-wintered stallions to kill, she concluded that frustration from inability to complete a sequence of behaviour (usually mating) was the root cause of what she described as frustration induced aggression. The problem for both owners and Verderers is to decide whether a stallion known to have killed should be allowed to remain on the Forest. The culprit in the present case has been removed and his fate is under

consideration. In the stallions favour it can be said that his actions are quite "natural" and probably common. Against this is the fear that he will kill again and the loss of a foal is an important matter for a commoner. His stock already faces more than enough natural and man made threats on the Forest. I should make it quite clear that this entirely inter-pony violence and there is no evidence that a stallion which has killed a foal represents any extraordinary threat to humans. All Forest ponies should be treated as wild animals and not be approached.

Achievements of Forest ponies There is, fortunately, a much happier side to Forest ponies, especially those broken to the services of man. But how often one hears even experienced horsey people say that they don't want a New Forest pony for themselves or their teenage child because "they are much too small aren't they?" Even the lightest woman seems to think she must have something 15 hands high (5ft) and smart young ladies of school leaving age would not be seen dead on anything under 14,2hh (4ft 10") which is the maximum size for a New Forest pony. I suspect this is more a question of image than ignorance. How do you create the impression of graceful equitation on an insignificant pony? The family saloon car may be better value, more economical and more reliable than the sports car, but the image is wrong. No doubt the polish and comb values of the showing community have much to do with this attitude to ponies, although pony breeders themselves are often among the worst offenders! For those rare people who value a pony for what it can do rather than what it looks like, I offer the example of my own sixteen year old New Forest mare, one generation removed from the Forest and only 13.3 hands (4ft 7"). No show judge would look at her twice. Over four days last month she carried me for the best part of one hundred miles around Dartmoor, her load including saddle bags, contents and tack accounting to 13 stone. She clambered to the top of tors to be photographed, wallowed over the surface of the blanket bog and forded rock strewn river beds. Her attempts to use stepping stones at one river crossing were not a success, but were at least a sign of intelligence and willingness to try something new. Of course this type of exercise does require appropriate training and feeding, but it also demonstrates the nonsense of the view that New Forest ponies are too small for adult use. There ought to be a great unexploited market for New Forest ponies if the idea could be overcome that show qualities and size are all that matters.

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