

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2010

A design plan for the Open Forest

The Forestry Commission calls its long term proposals for plantation management “design plans” and for some years there has been one in force for the inclosures of the New Forest. That plan is reviewed periodically and, on the whole, I think that it has worked reasonably well. There is one important exception to this in that the Commission continues to make an appalling mess during its timber extraction operations and is increasingly reluctant to restore the damage on completion.

One of the big advantages of the design plan for the Commission is that it avoids the necessity for complex consultations for every bit of inclosure felling. That is a great saving in time and cost. Such savings are at the root of a new proposal by the Commission that there should be a design plan for the Open Forest, or rather those parts of the Open Forest which are not officially woodland. Excluded from the plan therefore would be the thrown-open portions of the inclosures and the so-called “ancient ornamental woodland”. In short, the new design plan would cover the heaths, lawns, bogs and some areas of scrub.

An important objective of management of such areas is to ensure that they do not become overrun with trees – notably birch and Scots pine which regenerate freely, especially in areas which are not heavily grazed. In the past funds for clearance have often been limited, allowing the colonization by trees of large areas. This backlog is being steadily cleared, but the trees have developed to the point where they fall within the protection of the felling regulations which govern all landowners. The Forestry Commission is, rather surprisingly, included within this net. We therefore have the curious situation in which one branch of the Commission applies to another for felling licences covering its own land ! That in itself might not be a great problem, but the licensing process also requires consultations with various public authorities and inclusion on a public register. Altogether the process is complex and expensive. If it could be rolled up into a single document covering perhaps ten years work, within which managers would have a free hand, the Forestry Commission would be well pleased.

On the face of things, this seems like a very good idea and a sensible cost-cutting measure in a time of austerity, but there are serious potential risks. Some of these were discussed at a Queen’s House meeting of interested parties last month. They centre chiefly on landscape considerations.

The proposed targets of the Open Forest felling programme – birch and pine – are damaging to both grazing and some aspects of scientific conservation, but they can also constitute vital elements of the Forest’s landscape. For example the fine old Scots pine which are such a feature of Wilverley Plain and the old silver birches which fringe much of the woodland areas are as valuable to the landscape as the more traditional oak and beech and as much appreciated by the public. One has only to consider how many of them figure on picture post cards or in the New Forest coffee-table books of photographs which are snapped-up by the visitors.

In the 1970s, the late John Lavender, who combined the best qualities of scientist and connoisseur of landscape, prepared a survey of all the Scots pine on the Open Forest, providing for most of it to be cleared, but protecting the really important landscape clumps and many individual trees. I worked with him on that project and the judgements he then made have stood the test of time, even if what he sought to protect has not always escaped the philistines' axe. His survey has recently been supplemented by one undertaken for the National Park. Because some landscape features have only developed over the last forty years, that too is important. The two documents give a clear foundation for future management with landscape as an equal and not subservient partner of ecology and grazing.

Because annual programmes of work are discussed and agreed at present and must pass through the felling licence process, the risk of wholesale damage to the landscape is small, although not eliminated altogether. The relevant committees are dominated by ecologists, whose appreciation of landscape is not always very great and by graziers anxious to maximize stock feed. It is possible (although not particularly straightforward) to view felling licence applications online, so that in theory the public is told in advance if some favourite piece of woodland is threatened. With a blanket approval covering ten years' work of a particular type, but not tied-down to specific mapped sites, the opportunities for public participation could be reduced or even removed altogether. For this reason it is essential that the Forestry Commission builds into its design plan proposals very tight landscape safeguards, although how that is to be done remains unclear. The officers concerned have promised to provide further details of their ideas and these will be presented to a later meeting.

Ground nesting birds

All the principal access points to the open heaths of the New Forest have sprouted their annual crop of notices encouraging visitors not to harm ground-nesting birds. They are exhorted to keep to the main paths and to ensure that their dogs are under control. This year, signs of a similar form have also appeared on the National Trust commons which make up part of the Forest.

I am sure there are some conscientious people who pay careful regard to these notices and keep their dogs securely on leads and themselves on the main tracks throughout the nesting season, but I often have the feeling that they must frequent other parts of the Forest than that in which I live. I can see no appreciable alteration in the habits of dog walkers in the north of the Forest and rather doubt if things are really better elsewhere. There have certainly been changes in the pattern of use in recent times, but change does not necessarily mean improvement – often the contrary. Most marked among these changes has been the rise of the private dog pack. Twenty years ago many dog walkers (and there were far fewer of them then) visited the Forest with a single pet. Now the Range Rovers and Japanese equivalents roll up at my local car park and discharge three, four or even more dogs onto the Forest, all running loose and many oblivious to their owners' shouted instructions. No doubt a few of these are commercial operators of dog-exercising businesses.

The adjoining valley, Deadman Bottom, is hunted-over every few minutes throughout all daylight hours. The curlew and skylark which I remember from my early days in the village as dominating that valley are long since vanished. The nightjars which seemed to inhabit every holly tree on summer evenings are now rare.

Last week I observed an interesting example of this saturation hunting. Two people were making their way across the Forest at Turf Hill, along the north edge of Deadman Bottom. Their pack consisted of nine dogs, three of which (I presume young ones) were on leads. The remaining six hunted through the deep heather on each side of the track over a front of about one hundred yards. The number of dogs in this pack was, of course, unusual, but the behaviour of both man and dogs was entirely typical. It is, after all, only the natural instinct of dogs to hunt and it is an instinct which has been exploited by man in the form of gun dogs. For them birds are a deliberate target.

How sad it is that the New Forest is not afforded the same protection as almost every other area of rural common land during the bird-nesting season. No doubt Natural England and the Forestry Commission have decided that its ground-nesting birds must be sacrificed, even to the point of local extinction, because the political difficulties of giving them the same protection as elsewhere are insurmountable. As a policy that is understandable, but it should not be cloaked by a hypocritical pretence that all is well and that all we really need is a few more bland notices.

Stallions

The annual turn-out of stallions took place on 15th May and it was remarkable how quickly they managed to organize the disparate groups of mares into compact herds. I walked in the Forest on the following Monday and by then, give or take a bit of squealing, the reorganizing to the mares was complete. I saw no sign of fighting, but given that the entire turn out comprised only 27 stallions, there were plenty of mares to go round and a great deal of space for each stallion.

So far this year the number of foals seems to me to be small, due no doubt in part to last year's restrictions, but also perhaps to the difficult winter when some may have been aborted. The full picture will not emerge until foal counts are made later in the season. In 2010 the stallions will be on the Forest for a month only and clearly not all mares will find one or be found. That should restrict the foaling next year, but that is one of the objectives of the limitation on stallion numbers. There is absolutely no point in pouring yet more unwanted foals into an already overburdened market.

Sustainable building on the Forest

At their May Court the Verderers considered an unusual proposal from a local architectural group for the erection of a series of temporary buildings on the Forest. It appeared that "architects, artists and engineers" wished to "collaborate on exploring new models for rural architecture, through proposing a series of temporary buildings in the New Forest National Park". The implication was that these structures would be on the Open Forest, although no sites were specified. There was a great deal more along the same lines.

For example the Verderers were told that “it presents an exciting opportunity to explore creative interdisciplinary partnership working to explore innovative approaches to sustainable development in a unique rural area . . .” Well I suppose that one can hardly ask for more than that – if you can understand it. The Court gave very careful consideration to the proposal and concluded that it was not in accordance with the Verderers’ policies for Forest management and that it would be best located somewhere on private land.

Anthony Pasmore