

NEW FOREST NOTES JUNE 2016

Hardwoods versus conifers

Last month I wrote about the Forestry Commission's radical long term plans for phasing out, over the next two hundred years, much of its conifer growing and cropping in the New Forest. Interest in the plans has seemed slow to develop, probably because of their complexity and immense detail, but at the May Verderers' Court there were two opposing presentments on the subject. One from the New Forest Association supported the proposals and the other from a retired forester (Harry Oram) expressed concern at the ultimate loss of commercial softwood production in the New Forest.

There are, perhaps, not very many people now remaining who remember the brutal commercial activities of the Forestry Commission in the 1960s and earlier. In 1928 the Commission had given an undertaking that 60% of the "statutory inclosures" area would remain as hardwoods. This followed a campaign against conversion of the Forest's woods to conifer. That conversion was a policy that the Commission had been following, but despite the assurance the figure had actually fallen to 54% a few years later. By 1963 the proportion of hardwoods had dropped to 42% and a secret working plan of that year (there was no freedom of information in those days) provided that the Inclosures should ultimately comprise only 4% hardwood with 96% being conifer. Throughout the 1960s the Commission worked towards that target carrying out wholesale illegal clear felling of many of the finest areas of oak and beech throughout the Forest. Beautiful and much loved Inclosures such as Pitts Wood, Ravens Nest and Broomy were decimated in part, with the oaks originally planted to secure the future of the Royal Navy being replaced by dismal blocks of Corsican pine or Scots pine on the poorer soils and by Douglas fir on the richer sites. Even the small remaining fragments of the Forest's ancient ornamental woods which had survived within the Inclosures, having been preserved by the original plantation makers, were cut down. Among them were part of Knightwood, Puckpits and Oakley where centuries old pollarded beeches were swept away to make mining blocks or for firewood.

By November of 1968 the Forest was in uproar, with the protests led by the late Mrs. Jean Cobb. The Deputy Surveyor (Arthur Cadman), who was widely believed to be sympathetic to the opposition to Commission policy, resigned his post to be replaced by the hard line Dallas Mithen. There were protest meetings and even a ministerial visit, when James Prior was taken by local residents for an uncomfortable walk through Godshill Inclosure which was then marked for felling. It is against this rather shocking background that the present remedial proposals of the Forestry Commission must be judged.

Ultimately the "Minister's Mandate" gave an assurance that no further hardwood areas would be replaced with conifer and that the hardwood plantations would be managed on a rotation of at least two hundred years. Illegal clear felling would stop and a concurrent attempt to take crops from the open forest woodland would also cease. Since the 1960s, further advances have been made on the terms of the Mandate. New areas of oak have been planted, starting a slow but steady reversal of the

old policies. For example, the 18th century oak of Pitts Wood, illegally clear felled, was at first replaced by Douglas fir. Most of this blew down in 1990, after which oak was planted on the site. The planting promises the restoration of this once fine wood for the benefit of our grandchildren. Even in the last week I have seen new planting of oak at Ironshill and Busketts on areas cleared of conifer, but which were presumably originally hardwood.

The forestry pendulum in the New Forest has a way of swinging from one extreme to the other and in the new plans there is a danger of going too far towards a total anti-conifer bias. I don't share Mr. Oram's enthusiasm for commercial production, but there are certainly some conifer woods that make other positive contributions to the Forest. Examples are the "Verderers' Inclosures" of Dibden, Fawley and Hardley. Although recently reduced in area, they still absorb much recreational pressure from the Waterside towns and act as a valuable screen against development there. Fortunately the Commission has recognized these benefits and most of these plantations will be retained, if with a slow conversion to mixed woodland. How far broadleaved trees will thrive on those very poor soils will be a question for the future. Similarly, Dunces Arch and the small remaining parts of Markway and Slufers help to screen noisy and obtrusive roads. Within other plantations also there are areas of conifer which are of considerable amenity value, with mature Douglas fir making a particularly valuable contribution. The great fir avenues of Oakley are examples. Similarly, any attempt to clear the fine conifers from Bolderwood Grounds and return the area to its former condition would probably be met with fury by the many thousands of visitors to the area, although of course trees do not live forever and something must eventually succeed the present majestic trees. I think there is a much greater liking for conifers than some of us veterans of the 1960s conflicts are prepared to acknowledge. It is remarkable how many picture post cards sold in local shops portray conifers, and especially open forest Scots pine, rather than broadleaves.

If the Forestry Commission could only be persuaded to manage its conifer woods in a more civilized manner, clearing up waste, restoring and maintaining rides and drains and generally devoting at least half an eye to landscape considerations, I think it might secure a good deal more public support for its commercial activities. On balance though, I still believe that the design plan is a welcome step towards restoring the losses of the 20th century. There will be plenty of time for further swings of the pendulum during the two centuries life of the plan.

Selling the Forest

The proposal made during May that the New Forest District Council should work in conjunction with the National Park and others to encourage use of the area by film companies, is exactly the sort of exploitation which was so much feared when national park status was imposed upon us. Quiet rural locations elsewhere in the country which have hosted popular TV series and films have been ruined by the floods of visitors attracted to them because of their new-found fame. The prospect of the same thing happening here is quite appalling.

Even leaving aside the major threat of over-popularity of the chosen locations, the film companies themselves have scant regard for the places they use. I remember the occasion when parts of Ibsley Common were covered in artificial snow by one film company. When "Robin Hood Prince of Thieves" was filmed, partly in the Forest, at Mark Ash and Hampton Ridge, a shocking amount of rubbish was left about at the latter location. No doubt the filming produced a fat cheque for the Forestry Commission and any other landowners involved and presumably the council is hoping that further money will flood into the district, irrespective of the cost to the Forest itself and the convenience of local people not involved in the tourist trade.

Perhaps we can take comfort from the fact that almost constant aircraft noise throughout the district makes the Forest increasingly unsuitable for period dramas. Thirty or forty years ago, filming at Ashley Lodge was constantly disrupted as one aeroplane after another roared across the sky above and things are far worse today. Aircraft noise is an evil from which some good may come.

Dogs and deer

I cannot remember a spring when I have encountered such widespread chasing of deer by out of control dogs. Presumably following the philosophy of "on the Forest and off the lead", the owners of these dogs regard deer chasing as being of no consequence. After all, they are wild animals, so nobody loses or cares, do they?

In Rhinefield Sandys one weekday afternoon there were dogs chasing deer all over the place with no owners visible or, more to the point, audible. Ineffective yelling by the owners often accompanies these attacks. In Islands Thorns at the May bank holiday such shouting disturbed the peace as the dog or dogs harried one lot of deer after another for what seemed like half an hour. Worst of all was a case at Ogdens towards the end of May when a free running dog at least a quarter of a mile from its owner set about a herd of deer at Latchmore Shade early one morning. The dog succeeded in separating a deer from the herd, chasing it hard for hundreds of yards before the desperate victim managed to evade the pursuer. The dog then swung round and attacked the herd again, with the distant owner making not the slightest apparent attempt to control his pet. I fear greatly for this year's crop of foals if this sort of barbarous behaviour is allowed to continue. Surely the keepers could target prime dog running areas at this particularly sensitive time of the year.

Longbeech Cottage and the Markway rifle range

Back in February I described the complaints which had been made about the illegality of Longbeech Cottage and the Forestry Commission's rifle range at Markway on the open forest. During the intervening months, the Commission has been thinking about its replies. These came to the Verderers' Court in May.

In respect of Longbeech Cottage the Commission denies the illegality of retaining the house on its present basis, but has given an undertaking that it will be used only to accommodate staff and the cottage will not (as had been expected) be offered to let on the open market. I am not a lawyer,

but the defence of the cottage's status seemed to me to be remarkably weak. Still, the assurance as to occupancy is valuable and such woolly compromises are not uncommon in the management of the New Forest.

As to the rifle range, no legal justification was offered for its retention, but the Commission has agreed to remove the hideous hut if the Verderers would, in effect, turn a blind eye to the retention targets and the limited use of the range itself. If this had been the end of the 19th century rather than the beginning of the 21st, such redoubtable warriors as Briscoe Eyre would have ensured that lawyers' letters would already be flying about, but from a landscape point of view, the removal of the hut is a worthwhile gain and if some inoffensive and unfortunate visitor gets shot while wandering peacefully through the Forest, that is a matter for the Forestry Commission and not the Verderers.

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