

New Forest Notes – June 1996

Dead and Buried

I SUPPOSE that even the most vehement critic of hunting would hardly deny that there is one respect in which the hunts provides an invaluable service to the local farming community. They have for years collected -- and disposed of the carcasses of what is euphemistically described as "fallen stock". In other words, they have fed the unusable flesh to their hounds and disposed of the remainder under progressively tightening public health restrictions. The gory details do not matter very much, but the quantity of carcasses for disposal and the knock-on effects of the BSE regulations had threatened to promote a crisis in the Forest.

Any farming community has its casualty animals to dispose of, but in the New Forest the problem is particularly acute. Not only are there the natural deaths on farms, but the Forest, or rather those members of the public who abuse it, produces its own special crop of animals killed, maimed or poisoned as they go about their business. For many years now the annual toll of animals killed and injured in road accidents has fluctuated between one hundred and two hundred. No statistics are published of stock, poisoned by garden and other refuse, but in the course of a year the numbers are probably significant. Even natural losses from acorn poisoning, deaths at foaling time and from non man-made hazards such as bogs may be higher than on enclosed farms. Altogether there is a huge number of dead animals to be removed from the Forest each year, The Forestry Commission will not now permit burial on the Forest and the commoners have come to rely more and more on the service provided by the hunts. Unfortunately the service providers in turn have been under growing pressure for higher standards in the disposal of offal so that the charges made have tended to increase.

With the development of the BSE scare, the charges to commoners leapt to an astonishing £100 per head for Forest accident victims, although they have since fallen back to a more modest £30 to £40, perhaps reflecting recent government help to the rendering industry. While prices were at the higher level, there were fears that the Forest would quickly become a dumping ground for carcasses - not from the commoners themselves, because their dead animals are identified and recorded by the agisters, but from farmers unwilling to meet, the high cost of disposal. Provided any ear tag is removed and brands cut out or disfigured, identification is near enough impossible. The high cost of legal disposal on top of the loss of the animal made dumping a tempting prospect for the unscrupulous. Even at £35 per head there remains a potential problem. The Verderers accordingly investigated other possible disposal arrangements and of these burial on the holding seems the most practical and cost effective alternative to the hunts.

Somewhat surprisingly, it is not illegal to bury livestock on a farm. A list of the precautions which must be taken in doing so is contained in the official "Code of Good Agricultural Practice No. 12". Provided the farmer has no reason to suspect death from a notifiable disease (there would be no question of such a cause in most New Forest deaths), burial is permitted subject to certain constraints. For example, the grave must be at least 250 metres from any well or watercourse abstracted for human consumption and 30m from any other source of water. It must be 10m from any land drain and there are rules governing the depth and construction of the pit and the keeping of records. However, with digger hire at perhaps £13 per hour, burial on the farm begins to look like a competitive option. For those with their own transport and digging machinery, it must now be the 1st choice, disagreeable as the prospect may be.

BSE and the New Forest

Now that the rules on the destruction of cattle over 30 months old are becoming clearer, the great fear among most livestock keepers must be the extent and basis of the so called "targeted" slaughter. How great a connection with cases of infection will be enough to trigger the killing of healthy animals? Will it be sufficient that they were part of the same herd at the time of a proved case and, if so, what is the definition of, "herd"? In the past, for disease

control purposes, the Forest has generally been regarded as one farm. Now I have not the slightest idea if there have been any confirmed cases of BSE on the Forest itself. If there were any suspicion, I imagine the animals were quickly removed and the disease actually diagnosed on the holding. I also doubt if anyone would have been very anxious to talk about such cases. On the other hand, it is clear that there have been BSE cases in farms surrounding the Forest and that the animals from those herds have had direct or indirect contact with cattle turned out on the common grazings.

The precise detail of the targeted slaughter policy will therefore be crucial to the New Forest, as to every other large area of common land throughout the country. My experience, of dealing with the Ministry of Agriculture over common land matters is that they seem to have great difficulty in understanding them, but don't really like to admit this is the case. They therefore draw up rules based on enclosed farmland and tend to produce some rather chaotic situations on common land as a result. In the matter of BSE there seems a real danger that this could happen again. Suppose it could be shown that only one cow that subsequently developed the disease had run on the Forest, theoretically becoming part of the entire herd of about two thousand. Could that trigger the destruction of all Forest cattle which had been turned out at the same time? I know that there is no concrete evidence of horizontal transmission, but it is politics not science which is now writing the rule book. It is nightmare possibilities such as this which I feel are not yet being taken seriously enough by the Forest authorities.

Europe in the Forest

Some people who are heartily sick of what they see as European meddling in every aspect of British life and law, especially in the Forest, may feel that they are to receive a small compensation in the form of the EU habitat directives. I must admit straight away that I have not read these rather obscure productions of Brussels, but I have had the benefit of seeing a most interesting abstract and analysis prepared by the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. If the Trust's interpretation is correct, the directives will go far towards tying up the Forestry Commissions proposals for recreational development in some very difficult knots. As I understand it, the Commission has not yet accepted that the directives do apply to its operations in the Forest, but they are evidently worried enough about it to have deferred action on their current plans for car park and camp site development and alteration.

If the directives do in fact make it more difficult for developers (Forestry Commission or otherwise) to damage the Forest, then they are certainly to be welcomed, especially after some rather weak-kneed responses of other regulatory authorities to recent Commission ambitions. The Wildlife Trust believes that developers must prepare an assessment of their proposals and that they will have to demonstrate that the works will not "adversely affect the integrity of the European site". The assessment must be taken into account by those in a position to pass judgement on the proposals. In the Forest, of course, the judges are likely to be the Verderers and the chief potential developers the local authorities and the Forestry Commission. Unfortunately it is seldom the big physical developments such as a new road or camp site which constitute the main threat to the Forest. The real danger is the steady and insidious growth in pressure of too many people demanding too much, of a fragile resource, and that even Europe is almost certainly powerless or unwilling to prevent.

The Urban Park

After a recent visit to the arboretum off the Ornamental drive (it is an area I usually try to avoid), I came away, with, the feeling that the Forestry Commission must be in part a refuge for frustrated Park keepers. It is neat and tidy decorated, with seats, notices and an ornamental gateway. Forest "walks" radiate in all directions through the surrounding woodland and the whole effect is urban, if the Forest is a lily, there has been a great deal of gilding at Black Water, yet the Commission seems totally unaware that this form of management is even open to question, let alone wrong. How sad, that the Forest itself is apparently not good enough for the visitor and that it must be moulded and altered to more nearly reflect the urban environment from which he comes. I would like to think that it is not in

fact what visitors really want, but the numbers flooding through the attractions suggest that it is just another meeting of demand by supply. However, the Commission has fortunately not sunk to the level of triviality displayed in some other Forests. I recently spent a few days wandering around, the moors of the West Country and visited the extensive Commission plantations at Fernworthy and Soussons -- dreadful landscape spoiling expanses of Sitka spruce. Here the Commission sign boards are decorated with rather horrid little coloured relief panels of ponies and trees instead of the more dignified boards which, with some difficulty, we have been able to hold onto in the New Forest. Quite apart from such baubles a visit to these plantations is worthwhile as it reminds one just how beautiful by comparison are our own Inclosures for all their faults.