

New Forest Notes – June 1999

Return of the concrete crushers

Over eight years ago I welcomed the Forestry Commission's last drive to clear the Forest of wartime concrete. That work, at Stoney Cross, was highly successful. A visitor to the North Bentley area today would have the greatest difficulty in discovering where the concrete areas had ended and where the original grass began. The portions of the old aerodrome from which concrete was removed were filled with subsoil from the A 31 roadworks at Picket Post and a final coating of topsoil was then applied. In addition to the work at Stoney Cross, the crusher also cleared six and a half acres of concrete which had formed the base for a wall target at Leaden Hall on the Ashley Walk bombing range. Unfortunately, the results here were not so good. Perhaps because of the remoteness of the site, supervision was less intense and lorry loads of contaminated soil and rubbish were brought in and spread over part. The remainder was left without soiling and littered with concrete fragments. It was, and despite attempts to clear up some of the debris in the intervening years, it remains rather a mess.

At the May Verderers' Court, the Forestry Commission gave notice that it now intends to break much of the remaining concrete at Stoney Cross. This comprises an exceptionally ugly and deteriorating strip alongside the road from Ocknell to Fritham and some concrete "frying pans" (on which aircraft were parked) in Ocknell Camp site. All this concrete is, of course, useless to the commoners, although it has from time to time served other purposes. For example, it has provided a hard parking area around the ice cream van, it has been used for the lorries of the New Forest Hunt and it has sometimes had timber stacked upon it. I think what has finally decided the Commission that it must go is the fact that after fifty years its surface is beginning to break up badly. It is also interesting to see in Ocknell camp site how the concrete is shunned by the caravanners. Except in peak periods when space is at a premium, every van will be found parked on the grass, while the whole of the vast concrete area is vacant except for the odd car.

The Verderers, whose business it is to protect the traditional character of the Forest and the interests of the commoners, welcomed the Commission's announcement. So far as I can see, the formal consent of the Court is not required for this work. The Verderers did, however, take note of one or two dissenting voices at the Open Court, which had asked for the retention of a "memorial" area of concrete as a reminder of the old aerodrome. The Court asked for and received from the Forestry Commission, an assurance that the concrete bases of two large car parks west of the road would be retained for memorial purposes. One of the parks already contains an information plaque about the wartime use of Stoney Cross. As to concerns that hunt parking might be restricted, the Deputy Surveyor made it clear that the Janesmoor car park (which the hunt chiefly uses at present) will remain much the same size, although some deteriorating concrete will be replaced with gravel.

Perhaps the only real worry about the work is the Commission's proposal not to supply topsoil. Stoney Cross has demonstrated that untopsoiled areas which were cleared of concrete in the 1960s can recover, but that the process is exceptionally slow. The work undertaken in 1990 has produced far better grazing and landscape than that done in 1966 immediately adjoining. The Court has therefore asked the Commission to use its best endeavours to secure suitable topsoil, if only a thin cover, to speed recovery. I remember that when the initial breaking was done, and when the Rockford gravel pits were "restored", there were persistent claims from the commoners that the ponies suffered from teeth trouble through constant biting on stones. This danger is removed if topsoil is provided.

This is quite likely to be the last visit of the concrete crushers to the New Forest. The economics of the work depend upon there being a reasonable supply of material to break and sell in crushed form to the construction industry. After Stoney Cross is cleared, there is unlikely to be enough remaining to make a further visit viable. It will bring to an end, at Fritham at least, a long struggle to secure proper reinstatement of wartime encroachments. My earliest memories of the Forest are of standing outside the barbed wire perimeter fence near Janesmoor, gazing up at the huge silver monsters of aircraft parked on the North Bentley frying pans. Now, with the overflow camp site closed down and the concrete returned to grass, it is possible to imagine what pre-war Fritham must have been like - until one looks at the surging mass of tourist traffic on the roads past and through the village and at the packed Forestry Commission car parks.

Creating a miniature New Forest

Quite by coincidence, in May I was given the opportunity of a guided tour of another aerodrome in which concrete crushing on a monumental scale is now nearing completion. I imagine most people know the Cold War aerodrome of Greenham and Crookham Commons only from the television. Screaming protesters cutting wire, filthy camps and grim-faced police and troops were the public face of Greenham. Fortunately, that is all in the past, although I understand that two squatters' vans remain. Now the twelve hundred acres of the commons are being restored with the object of creating what is virtually a mini-New Forest with grazing ponies and cattle, a fenced and gridded perimeter, an administration modelled on the best features of that in the Forest and on Dartmoor and with almost all the airfield infrastructure removed.

There has been a good deal of communication of ideas between the real New Forest and the managers of this miniature copy. This is chiefly because the Queen's House ecologist lives in Newbury and has taken a keen interest in the project. Forestry Commission staff and other people from the Forest have been to Greenham to advise (hence my trip) and council officers from Newbury have been to the Forest. If the scheme works, it will be an outstanding achievement.

I spent a day there and after meeting the Project Officer and one of the council's legal advisers, I gained the impression that they have to face just about every common-land problem (and there are many) in the book. Not least of these is how to secure sufficient grazing and browsing pressure to restore a New Forest type landscape and ecology. The whole area has been ungrazed for many years, although the airfield itself was mown. I have not seen any figures, but to judge from the maps they have had to start off by breaking several hundred acres of concrete - work undertaken by a Ringwood firm of specialists who are likely to deal with Stoney Cross after they finish at Newbury. They have dug out immense fuel tanks, stockpiled fuel-contaminated soil and are now wondering what to do with the tremendous mounded missile silos. They are likely to remain, stripped of all their fittings, and should provide welcome "shades" for the grazing stock in summer. The Project Officer pointed out two fences surrounding the wrecked silos and cheerfully recalled that anyone penetrating the area between them would, according to orders, have been shot without further warning !

There was one rather sad aspect to my visit. Inside the security fence (which is still intact), the air base reminded me so much of the New Forest of forty years ago. Every gravel pile, and there are many of them resulting from the restoration, seemed to have its own resident plover surveying the countryside around. Skylarks were everywhere, scurrying in and out between the concrete trucks. Deer were grazing in the open at midday. All this will go. The price of restoration is unrestricted public access (with dogs), so this is probably the last season for the ground nesting birds on anything like the present scale.

Deer Problems

The Forestry Commission has just issued a new report called "Deer and their Management in the New Forest". Convention requires that everyone (Verderers included) passes over the fact that in 1851 the Crown surrendered the right to keep deer in the New Forest and awarded to itself handsome compensation for the loss of that allegedly valuable right ! The Commission is now into deer keeping in a big way and the Forest would certainly be a poorer place without some of them - the deer.

I have not seen the full report, but the "Executive Summary" is rather rambling and difficult to read and understand. This is not helped by the complications of the subject itself. For example, there is a difference between "actual" and "censused" populations, the former always being larger because of the difficulty of making an accurate count. The report proposes an actual population of 1200 fallow, 100 red, a similar number of sika, and 250 roe. Muntjac (regarded as undesirable) are to be shot on sight !

There are times when even the most tolerant Forest farmer feels sore about the Forestry Commission's deer-keeping activities. When I found twenty two of their fallow last week devouring part of my hay crop in a two acre paddock, surrounded by houses and in broad

daylight, I felt sore. It seemed like a good idea to seek a rather more rigorous enforcement of the Crown's moral obligations under the Deer Removal Act.