NEW FOREST NOTES MARCH 2016

Mark Ash Wood and chainsaw jaws

"In the course of less than one hundred years, Mark Ash will be a treeless waste". This prophesy was made on 28th May 1875 by the Commissioner of Woods (the Hon. Kenneth Howard) responsible for the New Forest, in reply to a question from the great grandfather of the present Lord Montagu. The Commissioner was giving evidence to a select committee of the House of Commons which was then considering the future of the New Forest. His prediction, made even before the rise of the grey squirrel (the chief enemy of beech woods), the drought of 1976, the hurricane of 1987 and the high browsing pressures of the early 21st century, proved incorrect, but perhaps more in its timing than in the eventual outcome. Mark Ash Wood (on the ornamental Drive from Brockenhurst to Bolderwood), the once crowning glory of the Forest's "ancient ornamental woods", is now in a very bad way and heading for ultimate destruction. Most of the huge pollarded beeches photographed and painted by the Victorians are now gone. Large gaps which supported thriving trees even into my lifetime are now barren expanses of bracken. There is a complete absence of recent natural regeneration. The once flourishing regeneration plots (established after the last war) are, in large measure, destroyed by grey squirrel attacks. The wreckage of fallen trees is everywhere left to rot, blocking the paths, disfiguring the appearance of the wood and achieving nothing towards promoting regeneration, whereas once it would have been sold to local people for firewood. Mark Ash is, in short, a terrible and neglected mess which is a discredit to all branches of management and not just the Forestry Commission. Now a new and entirely unexpected threat may, if not checked, inflict a death blow on what remains.

There is a lot of nonsense talked about the Forest's old woods and some of the myths need dispelling if we are truly to understand the present problems and likely future of Mark Ash. Firstly, much of it is not untouched "wildwood", but was once just as much farmland as, for example, the nearby village of Minstead is today. Then, perhaps between one and two thousand years ago the farms were abandoned and trees colonized their sites, probably in a period of low grazing pressure very different from the over 10,000 livestock in the Forest which suppresses natural regeneration today. Mark Ash became, over time and with special management practices like pollarding, the beautiful woodland so admired by witnesses before the 1875 committee. By the late 19th century there was a widespread view that the old woods of this type were in terminal decline and required urgent intervention by man to ensure natural replacement of the older generation of trees. Had the problem been viewed on a Forest-wide basis, this would have been seen as a questionable conclusion, resulting from focus only on the decaying giants of such places as Mark Ash. Some woods were certainly heading for destruction, but others were thriving and expanding in different parts of the Forest. The broken limbs of a fallen three hundred year old beech impress themselves on our minds, but we fail even to notice the slender saplings nursed-up in bramble bushes elsewhere. Such ebb and flow of the woodland is a natural process and one not to be interfered with so long as decay and renewal remain more or less in balance – both in space and over time. Things are very different today. All the damaging forces I have described above are now combining to destroy old woods and

to suppress the establishment of new ones. In the 1870s there were half the number of grazing animals that there are today and they roamed far outside the Forest. That meant that a significant proportion of the Forest livestock was often not actually grazing the Forest at all, but rather living on the lanes and verges from Romsey to Christchurch. The installation of grids around the Forest boundary in 1964 changed all that. Never in modern history has the grazing pressure approached present-day levels, whipped up by a misguidedly focused national subsidy regime. The commoners need and deserve the money they receive, but surely it should not be paid on the basis of the more animals you depasture the more money you will get. There are much better ways of targeting subsidy. Expansion of woodland, even onto formerly wooded sites, is blocked in order to provide more grazing for the numbers of animals which have now to be accommodated, while any attempt to protect and encourage regeneration in the declining woods is abandoned. The system has become grossly unbalanced and unstable.

The latest assault on Mark Ash has come from an entirely new and unexpected source and, left uncontrolled, it could be the death sentence for the wood as we know it. Just before Christmas it became apparent that huge beeches of 150 to 200 years in age were having their bark torn off to a height of six feet or more, in many cases completely killing the tree. Squirrel damage to smaller beeches is common, but this was something entirely different. Trees of over a metre diameter are falling victim. The number involved has not been accurately assessed, but is already several dozens in Mark Ash itself and more in the adjoining Inclosures. If this can happen in two months or so, the future of Mark Ash is bleak indeed. The culprits are New Forest ponies who have suddenly turned from their natural habits to this extraordinary form of vandalism. They appear to be learning one form the other so that there are now several groups engaged in tree-killing. There have always been cases of barking by ponies and most of these have been attacks on holly stems, but nobody has seen this sort of damage to beech before. When I was working in Oakley throughout the winter of 2008-9, there was one mare in particular who started to bark small beech trees of perhaps twenty or thirty years old, but the ancient trees were never threatened.

All sorts of theories have been advanced as to the cause of this behaviour –“ the ponies are short of feed”, “they need minerals that the bark is providing” and so on. My own view is that this is simply a mischievous trait developed by one or more mares and then learned by its companions, although clearly they regard the bark as a source of nutrition. It is difficult to believe that if a catastrophic shortage of feed or lack of minerals was responsible, such damage would not be occurring from Beaulieu to Godshill. In any case, most ponies on the Forest look well fed at present. Many years ago, in my own village, a single mare started to attack all the holly hedges, doing immense damage by leaning into them and barking every stem. This caused such fury amongst local residents that the mare was removed. The culprit was banished before she could indoctrinate others and the damage stopped at once, never to recur.

At the time of writing the future of Mark Ash may depend upon a meeting which has been called by the Forestry Commission.

Roman charcoal

Last August I wrote about plans by the New Forest History and Archaeology Group to undertake excavations near Godshill under the direction of professor Tony King. Like many events planned for late last summer, the work ran into trouble with incessant rain, so that the half of the project which related to a bomb-damaged Bronze Age burial mound had to be abandoned. Excavation of a supposed hut site did, however, go ahead and the results of professor King's work are to be published later this month in the Group's annual report. Those results were completely unexpected, both as to the nature and date of the site. Rather than being the remains of a dwelling, this circle was some sort of industrial feature involving the use or creation of large amounts of charcoal. If it was a production site, it was different in form to the three hundred or so "charcoal pits" known in the New Forest and which span a period of at least seven hundred years ending in about 1920. Those pits all have the same pattern and are mostly in or adjacent to existing woodland.

The excavation produced no pottery or other man-made items which could assist with dating this "platform site" (as it has been named), but the charcoal itself carries within it the secret of its creation, through a technical process called carbon 14 dating. This has shown that the site originated in the late Iron Age or early Roman periods – probably 1st century AD – and that is a result particularly interesting in a New Forest context. Further survey work has shown that the platform is one of at least four similar features within about half a mile of each other and in an area now devoid of woodland except for a few holly clumps. Its makers must have been operating in a New Forest very different to what we see today. Even in recent centuries, charcoal production was always carried out where trees were felled, rather than having timber brought to a fixed location. Transport of heavy materials was difficult and expensive. Because of this we may envisage significant woodland on the now bare hillsides south east of Godshill where the platforms were established. Whether or not the Roman operators were responsible for the clearance of such woodland has not been determined, but they could well have started the process. Within the same area as the platform sites are numerous enigmatic mounds with adjoining pits whose purpose and date is unknown. They have been variously identified as burial sites or as the completely natural results of the decay of soil-filled root plates following storm damage to woodland. Such features are to be found across the Forest from East End to Hale, but the platform site at Godshill partly overlies one of these features suggesting that here at least the mounds are likely to be prehistoric in origin.

Because platform sites are very slight and extremely easy to destroy by later land use, we are unlikely to discover how widespread they may once have been in the remainder of the New Forest. Only the undisturbed and agriculturally poor nature of these northern hills has allowed survival here.

One other charcoal accumulation, dated to about the same period, has been found in recent years and that was near Latchmore Brook, about 3km to the south west, but outside Ashley Walk no platforms have yet been identified.

Anthony Pasmore