

## New Forest Notes – March 1993

### **Burning the Forest**

To the outsider it must seem as though the Forestry Commission is overtaken by a form of collective madness at this time each year. Parties of Commission staff appear to go about intent on devastating large parts of the New Forest by fire. Acres of golden gorse (at the peak of its flowering in March) are reduced to charred stumps and the heaths which made such a perfect purple carpet for last August's picnics, become a blackened desert over which the wind drives little spirals of ash and dust.

The controlled burning programme, which is what this annual feast of incendiarism comprises, is an example of one of those management policies which requires apparent cruelty to produce kindness. Indeed, much of the Forest's heathland probably had its origins in the burning campaigns of our remote ancestors and it requires periodic spring cleaning by fire if it is to survive clear of invading scrub. There is also in immediate short term benefit to the commoners stock in the form of fresh green shoots of purple moor grass and, at least in theory, the process helps to rejuvenate gorse bushes which die out if allowed to become old and leggy. Critics of burning on the other hand have suggested burning is contributing to the decline of gorse in the Forest and that there is a long term loss of nutrients from the heaths because of repeated burning.

The burning programme is not the haphazard process it may appear at first sight. All the chosen sites are discussed at length by the Forestry Commission Committee which concerns itself with Open Forest management. Areas to be burnt are kept relatively small (usually not more than about fifteen acres) to minimise the wildlife, and a strict rotation is observed with many years elapsing between burning on each site. Current safety regulations require a trace or firebreak to be cut by machine around the margins of each burning area and skilled Forestry Commission teams are in attendance so that (usually) the fires are kept under control. All burning must, unless approval is obtained for an extension to the permitted period, be completed by the end of March and this often presents considerable problems if weather conditions are unsuitable. It is common for huge backlogs to build up in a succession of wet springs. This year the Commission is making a determined effort to complete the planned work, and there have been few days in the later part of February which have not seen Clouds of yellow smoke drifting across the Forest with its characteristic heath fire smell.

Whatever the technical arguments over grazing benefits or long term losses, burning is undoubtedly the most efficient way of keeping the heaths open and of perpetuating their beauty. Swiping, which is the only practical but costly alternative, leaves behind a litter of smashed vegetation which can disfigure the ground for years. With fire, the blackening has all but vanished by the summer and with in eighteen months it takes very close examination to

trace the limits of the area which has been burnt. It also has the important advantage of reducing the risk of uncontrolled summer fires which can have devastating effects on vegetation and wildlife, sometimes even burning through peat to the mineral soil beneath. Such a fire occurred several years ago at Buckherd Bottom near Picket Post and has cost a great deal of time and money in remedial work.

Prior to the last war there were great conflicts between the Commoners and the Commission over the extent of the burning programme. When the commoners felt that insufficient had been burnt, they ran their own unofficial parallel programme and the Commission responded by further severe cuts in the work as punishment. Today things are generally more civilised with both sides anxious to co-operate. In any case I once heard an old commoner remark, there is really very little point in setting fire to the Forest these days as the Commission's fire fighting teams are so fast and efficient.

### **Holly Pollarding**

Last year I mentioned the early stages of the experiments in holly pollarding. Throughout this, winter the programme has been greatly expanded so that there are now few of the Open Forest where it is not possible to find the stark white and branchless stumps of holly sawn off at about six feet from the ground surrounded by the debris of their former crowns, stripped of every leaf and much of their bark. There can be no doubt that the experiment has been a most welcome one to the Forest ponies who have demonstrated their delight by scavenging every last scrap of green or juicy material from the felling. It must be admitted, however, that the initial effect is quite hideous so that some further explanation of the work and its objectives may be of interest.

The primary object of holly pollarding is to provide feed for the ponies but it is also claimed that the process is capable of prolonging the life of a tree and, when successful, the sad skeleton left by the forester is quickly clothed with a dense crop of new shoots. I have been looking at many of last winter's pollards and in general, the experiment seems to have worked well. However, there are a number (perhaps 10% to 15%) of unaccountable failures where the tree appears to have been killed outright or at least to have failed to shoot in the first summer. This is disturbing since grazing pressure is too intense to allow more than the occasional new holly tree to establish itself on the open heath and we cannot afford to lose holly at this rate over the long term. If, as in the time of the royal deer forest, holly is again to become a regular browse crop, we may have to find ways of establishing and protecting new clumps to make good losses. This will be a slow and expensive business.

Another criticism of the scheme is that piles of debris are left behind after the ponies have taken all they want, and it is clearly important that efforts are made to dispose of this waste. At least the larger wood should be saleable as dry holly makes an excellent fuel.

I hope that some attempt is made to record exactly what is being cut and where and when. Experiments without adequate recording have been the curse of the New Forest over the years. Someone has a bright idea and puts it into effect without making any record of his work and in ten years time all memory of it is lost. In this case each felling should be plotted on the stock maps with its date and description so that success or failure can be judged. I also suspect that there is, as usual, not much landscape input to the experiment. Providing feed for the ponies is, of course crucial, but well-loved and prominent landscape trees should not be cut. There is no shortage of suitable trees in dense holly woods of the Open Forest where to be fair most of the work has been undertaken. However, this is not an invariable rule and some open-grown cut trees will be a sad loss if they eventually die.

### **Timber Extraction Damage**

As this winter has progressed, the Forestry Commission's, choice of season to launch its riding damage proposals has begun to look increasingly unhappy. While I regard the proposals as being generally fair and worthy of support, it is not surprising that their authors are being given a rough ride when they are themselves perpetrating some of the worst timber extraction damage I have seen in the New Forest since the 1960s. I accept that timber production is a messy business, but to permit extraction under the exceptionally wet conditions of late December and most of January does seem appallingly thoughtless. Some of this damage is to the Inclosure rides which the Commission presumably regards as expendable. Although no amount of restoration, will recreate the soil structure, wrecked by modern machinery. Moreover the Inclosure drains, particularly those bounding the rides, are almost universally neglected, so that any long term recovery of the surface to a condition suitable for riding is very doubtful. The deep creamy yellow mud which now disfigures much of Knightwood means that the tracks will be fragile for years.

Where extraction damage becomes quite inexcusable is off the rides in the ancient pre inclosure woods, such as, those around Stockyford Green and on the Open Forest. At Nices Hill near Linwood, tractors have been allowed to run riot over grass areas surrounding High Corner Wood, extracting timber at a time and in a direction which can have no justification. Similarly, in Berry Wood near Burley, a considerable mess has been made taking out timber which fell in the great storms of 1987 and 1990. Six weeks further delay to the present drier conditions, would have avoided all this damage. The pressing urgency of a contract can scarcely be argued in respect of timber which was blown down years ago. We are told that the Ancient and Ornamental Woods are priceless historical survivals but the Commission appears to pay them scant respect when selling off a few cords of firewood.

I have little sympathy for the (few) extreme riders who blindly state that horses are not damaging the Forest or who claim the right to damage it because others do so, but the commission will find it much easier to sell its proposals to the moderate majority once its own house has been put in order.

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