

New Forest Notes – March 1995

Hampshire's New Forest purchase

The purchase by Hampshire County Council of 300 acres of the Open Waste of the New Forest ought, in theory, to be good news. The land is at present owned by the minerals company Tarmac and comprises the whole of Hyde Common and Gorley Hill, together with smaller parts of both Ibsley and Rockford Commons. Gravel companies in general have not had a very happy relationship with Forest interests, where the business of hoggin extraction is concerned, but it is many years since commercial gravel digging last took place within the perambulation.

This particular company has, in recent years, pursued a policy of what might be described as benign neglect in respect of its New Forest landholdings. It has also cooperated within minor conservation measures, but more important than this, it has not permitted any of the much-feared organised recreational development which is damaging so much of the countryside under the respectable cloak of diversification. Over the last twenty years, its commons have remained virtually unaltered.

At first sight it may seem strange that the company should have agreed to sell land which still contains significant gravel reserves. Hyde Common, for example, has been mined in only a few small areas and is thought to contain quite large gravel deposits, although of less depth than on Ibsley and Rockford Commons. However, Hyde is almost completely surrounded by houses, and even the most optimistic gravel producer could scarcely expect planning permission to be given there. Gorley Hill, once very rich in gravel, is now almost completely worked out and there is little prospect of permission to dig the small surviving southern tip of the plateau. Similarly, the greater part of the reserves of the small part of Ibsley which Tarmac owns is exhausted. On Rockford, on the other hand, I believe that there is actually planning permission of very ancient date to extract gravel south of Bigsburn Hill. However, evidence given in the 1960s suggested that the quality of the gravel here is extremely poor. Overall, the company do not seem to be selling anything of great commercial value, however important the sites may be to the New Forest.

From the Forest's point of view, the important question is how safe will the land be in the County Council's hands? The purchase of such prestigious property within the Forest might present the Council with an almost irresistible urge to "manage" the land and there are already rumours (perhaps quite unfounded) of grand recreational projects such as educational and sporting trails and nature walks. These commons, beautiful and remote, demand more than any other part of the Forest to be left alone. They need to be managed (if managed at all) as minimally and inconspicuously as possible. Probably more by luck than intention, the gravel company has been rather successful in doing just that. However, it is not a policy I would expect to commend itself to the image-building recreational specialists of a

thrusting local authority. The temptation to produce an "Avon Valleys Commons Experience" information pack and the "Western Forest Waymarked Trail" may prove overwhelming. There would also have to be a selection of discreetly sited car parks and picnic areas. I hope I am wrong.

The second and completely unrelated concern over the purchase is confined to hunting interests. I have not followed the progress of the litigation over banning hunting on county council lands, but if such a ban is eventually upheld, the possession by an anti-hunting local authority of a significant piece of the Forest would mark an important symbolic encroachment on the hunt's activities. In practice, of course, it might be very difficult to prevent hounds from crossing an entirely undefined boundary between one part of the common and another or to prove that they had done it. I do not imagine that the hunts spend much time on Hyde or Gorley Hill surrounded as they are by development, but that is not really the point. Anti-hunting groups will no doubt see the acquisition as one more turn of an ever tightening screw. Altogether, I suspect that the County Council may find that owning part of the New Forest is not quite the trouble-free task it might have expected.

Feeding areas

One of the really controversial issues on Dartmoor is the damage done by commoners' feeding stock on the Moor and transporting fodder to the feeding sites. Legal action has been threatened by the national park authority and, for all I know, may by now have been to feed stock anywhere other than their own sodden fields. The Deputy Surveyor has now asked the Verderers to enforce the byelaw which enables the Court to dictate the location of feeding areas. This, of course, presents something of a dilemma for the Verderers. On one hand they support the action of those caring commoners who provide feed for their cattle, while on the other hand, it has to be admitted that many of the feeding areas now in use are quite unsuitable and are causing unacceptable damage particularly to heather. Fortunately, with the dense network of roads throughout the Forest, giving easy access to all parts, the problem is not insoluble. There are innumerable areas of abandoned hardstandings (many of them ex-military) which are close (but not too close) to roads and which are ideally suited cattle feeding. The Verderers and the Commission will now be having discussions with a view to relocating the most damaged feeding areas.

Cattle feeding, or more exactly the congregation of cattle around their owners' holdings at night over many centuries was responsible for the beautiful greens which surround so many of our Forest's villages. A steady drain of nutrients from the depths of the Forest was discharged on the village margins in the form of dung. This enrichment displaced the heath with grassland. Those ladies who now walk out from the neat suburban streets of Lyndhurst in their tiny shoes, may like to ponder the origins of the velvet turf beneath their feet. They owe it to a sea of mediaeval cattle dung.

Turnpikes

Sometimes when sitting in the Verderers' Court, I have a feeling that the length and dryness of legal argument is in inverse proportion to the value of its subject matter. However, just occasionally such tedious diatribes throw up an interesting piece of local history. This was the case in one recent squabble and it took the form of a Turnpike Act, a copy of which the Forestry Commission's land agent has kindly given me to read.

I suppose like most people I was vaguely aware that many of the Forest's principal roads were once turnpikes, but I had never before seen the Act creating a trust or understood fully how a turnpike worked.

The Act, dated 1832, provides for the making of a turnpike on Cranborne Chase, extending into the Forest via Fordingbridge and terminating at the Bell Inn in Brook. The road also had two branches – one outside the Forest and the other from Bramshaw Telegraph to Redlynch. A large number of turnpike trustees was appointed and they were charged with building the road, erecting toll houses and bars, gates and weighing machines (some tolls were based on weight). The list of permitted tolls describes an extraordinary collection of vehicles, many of which are quite new to me and include such oddities as sociable, calashes, curricles, whiskeys, berlins and chaise marines. All these, with many others were charged at 4½d. Commercial vehicles were charged according to the width of tyre, the cost increasing as the width decreased. I presume this was because narrow iron wheels caused more damage to the gravel surface. Charges ranged from 3d to 6d. The real villain of the turnpike road was evidently a cart or wagon "having the nails of the tire of the wheels projecting more than one quarter of an inch". Such anti-social vehicles attracted a crippling charge of ten shillings. Exempt from toll were carts carrying the natural product of the Open Forest – furze, peat, turf or heath and also those carrying lime or chalk for manure.

The Brook to Fordingbridge turnpike, together with its Downton branch, evidently had a short life as it was almost certainly defunct by the late 1870s. All that now survives is a massive toll bank from Telegraph to Picket Corner against Islands Thorns Inclosure, although its position in the middle of the network is a little difficult to account for. The possibility of an earlier turnpike on the same part of the route cannot, I suppose, be ruled out.

Bramshaw had a second turnpike of the Landford road through the village (referred to in the Cranborne Act) and well preserved toll banks on the A31 east and west of Picket Post clearly show the ancestry of that road. At least part of the A35 was also a turnpike with the name Brinton's Toll Bar surviving south west of Bank and the other end at Holmsley Toll cottages. I have once heard these two bars referred to as Clare Levett's Toll Posts. No doubt research would throw up records of turnpike trusts in other parts of the Forest as well and this is clearly a fascinating and much neglected aspect of local history.