

New Forest Notes – March 1998

Destruction in Islands Thorns Inclosure

In November of last year, the New Forest Association reached agreement with the Forestry Commission on a series of principles for the management of the Inclosures (the timber plantations of the Forest). They covered a wide range of subjects from the protection of character trees to the type of gravel to be used on forestry roads and included precautions against extraction damage. At the time, I'm sure most members of the Association's Council believed they were entering new phase of relations with the Commission in which the irritating amenity battles of recent years would finally be laid to rest. Everyone, especially those of us who serve on the Association's woodland sub-committee, was busy congratulating themselves for a job well done. Now, scarcely three months later, all this has changed. A walker in the woods north of Fritham could be forgiven for concluding that the Commission has torn up the agreement and thrown it into the waste bin.

In Islands Thorns Inclosure there is a scene of utter devastation, while in nearby Hasley the marking of trees for felling promises violation of a further three separate clauses of the agreement. For those of us who have consistently argued in favour of retaining the Forestry Commission as the principal management agency in the New Forest, the whole thing is profoundly depressing. What has happened to bring about this state of affairs?

Islands Thorns is a largely oak wood, planted in 1852 with the object of providing for warship construction in the middle of the next century. As its military value has declined, it has steadily developed into one of the half dozen most beautiful 19th century woods of the Forest. Last year it was marked for a commercial silvicultural thinning and work commenced towards Christmas. Most of the trees to be taken seemed to be in accordance with the terms of the newly negotiated agreement and, to that extent, there were no grounds for complaint. Then, during the almost monsoon conditions which prevailed in January, the Commission allowed extraction to commence, reducing the smooth grassy rides to a state reminiscent of a First World War battlefield. Almost every ride in the northern part of the Inclosure was systematically destroyed within a matter of weeks. My own observations suggest that well over three miles of track have been ruined, together with widespread disruption of the remainder of the woodland floor and wholesale blocking up of the old hand-dug drainage system.

The soil structure of these rides is exceptionally fragile, comprising a few inches of topsoil, usually over a thin layer of gravel, which in turn rests directly on heavy yellow clay. Once destroyed, this profile can never be recreated. So-called "restoration" involves pushing back into the ruts a confused mixture of clay and topsoil in which the former always predominates. This may give a superficial appearance of a ride but it remains for all time effectively ruined within moist areas. It is incapable of taking the weight of a horse and in wet weather is often impassable to pedestrians. The rides in Islands Thorns display some of the worst damage I have seen in the New Forest since Brinken Wood near Lyndhurst was ruined in 1970. Frantic efforts are now being made to conceal the worst evidence

by pushing off the tops of the extruded clay mounds back into the ruts from which they came. This makes no sense in engineering terms. The Commission has always in the past (and quite rightly) insisted that remedial work has to wait for dry conditions and cannot be rushed. Now they are floundering about in the mud on a cosmetic exercise which it has been suggested is designed chiefly to frustrate photographic recording of the devastation. Fortunately, some of my NFA colleagues were quick off the mark with their cameras preceding the scraper blades by some days. However, the folly of this work goes further than mere concealment. Huge amounts of cordwood and many trees remain to be extracted. Attempted repair, however superficial, is pointless until the process of removing timber is complete.

The Commission's excuse is the unconvincing one that they were compelled by English Nature to extract at this time of year and therefore had no option. That has been the standard answer to every instance of extraction damage over many years and is just as regularly denied by English Nature. In any case, the nesting "closed season" for extraction extends only from April to July, leaving eight months of the year (including some of the driest) to choose from. But that aside, both the excuse and the anticipated denial are quite immaterial. The plain fact is that a caring and responsible landowner would immediately have ordered a halt to extraction when the dreadful consequences of failing to do so became apparent after Christmas. Full responsibility for what happened therefore rests with the Forestry Commission.

Threats to Hasley Inclosure

Three miles to the south west of Islands Thorns lies the second wood which seems to put in question the value of last year's agreement between the New Forest Association and the Forestry Commission. Fortunately, this is so far threatened rather than actual damage.

Following the cutting of ancient beeches at Blackensford Hill near Burley, the Forestry Commission agreed that "character trees, including large, leaning, distorted trees, pairs of trees, multi-stemmed, coppiced and pollarded trees" would not be felled except in special circumstances and then only after notice had been given. Trees of landscape importance and isolated large old conifers would site be retained.

In January the chairman of the Association's woodland sub-committee, Tim Dixon, discovered trees marked for felling in the south east corner of Hasley. If this work goes ahead, it will violate every one of the prescriptions noted above with the exception that no pollards are involved. The marks which foretell felling (sections of bark cut from the trunks) are there for all to see. Old stunted chestnuts coppiced chestnuts. pairs of trees. and ancient Scots pine dotted about the wood are all threatened. Hasley is an elevated inclosure of landscape importance and a few years older than Islands Thorns. It has long been famous for its sweet chestnuts and the old trees made an impressive skyline feature until many were felled to be replaced by conifer. However, much still remains. The felling now proposed is officially 50%, but in fact is nearer to 80% or 90% in parts. It appears totally unnecessary. The canopy has been opened up in recent storms leaving plenty of space for replanting. The sub-

committee meets this week (February 25th) and I understand that It is likely to seek an urgent meeting with the Commission in the hope of averting a second tragedy in as many months.

Spending the Life Money

The first signs of European "Life" money (a huge grant for conservation) flooding into the Forest are now apparent. Shiny new vehicles bearing the European gold stars are to be seen and there are terrifying rumours of the number and cost of information boards and signs which are to be scattered about the Forest. I say rumours because no application has been made to the Verderers for the erection of the such structures, and without the consent of the Court they would be illegal. The predicted publicity machine is evidently just beginning to bite and there will be few Forest people who will welcome that. The practical work on the ground is an entirely different matter and will be of considerable benefit to many spheres of Forest life.

I have been to look at some of the first rhododendron clearance at Foldsgate Hill north of Lyndhurst and the initial results are impressive. Foldsgate is a delightful backwater, really known only to the residents of the Pikes Hill area of Lyndhurst, unspoilt and undefiled by car parks or camp sites even if there is a shattering noise from the nearby A337. The bushes in this badly infested area are being dug out rather than cut and sprayed as has been the Forestry Commission's usual policy in past clearances. Digging was pioneered in the

New Forest by the National Trust on Hale Purlieu and, if followed up by repeated annual weeding of the regrowth from "missed" portions of root, it is by far the neatest and most effective form of control. All the waste is heaped and burnt. However, in densely wooded areas (as opposed to open heath or Forest lawn) there are special problems. These are already showing themselves at Foldsgate. It is simply impossible to dig out all rhododendron roots where they are intermixed with the roots of trees. Wholesale regrowth may therefore be expected next year and will presumably have to be killed by chemical spray.

Satisfying as it is to see dense rhododendron plantations cleared, I am far from convinced that the Commission is dealing with the problem in the best way. Even the European money is not limitless and may be exhausted in sorting out a few areas such as Foldsgate. It would, perhaps, have been better to tackle the very widespread scatter of isolated bushes which are to be found across thousands of acres of heathland and wood and which threaten to engulf the entire Forest with seedlings and suckers over the next few decades if they are not controlled. Such work would be of much greater long term value, but would lack the obvious impact and publicity which are fundamental to the present scheme. Of course, if any money remained at the end, then it would certainly be worth undertaking the more spectacular projects.



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Anthony Pasmore.



The deep ruts left by the Forestry Commission plant at Islands Thorns Inclosure can be seen in this photograph. Photo: A. Soper.