

## New Forest Notes – March 1991

### WINTER FEEDING

The recent cold weather has highlighted a number of problems arising out of supplementary feeding of Forest animals. Generous people, anxious to put a warm dry meal inside a Forest pony or two, have been donating hay from their own probably meagre stocks. Others, less generous, fling out soiled bedding or musty bales for the animals to pick over. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of thought as to the positioning of these gifts. During the snow, I came across one group of ponies standing on a tarmac road where, 40 m.p.h. limit or not, speeds of sixty miles an hour remain common. They were eating neat little piles of hay distributed along the verge! The moral of this is that if you must feed, do it well away from the roads.

Of course the whole question of whether or not to feed during severe conditions is probably as old as the Forest itself. Few would argue about the necessity for feeding Forest cattle, out there are strongly differing opinions when it comes to ponies. The traditional view is that a good pony will fend for itself and that providing hay will merely draw it out of the Forest where it has shelter and its own natural foods of gorse and holly. It will then hang around waiting for the next hand out and will eventually lose condition. The contrary opinion is that a regular supplement of good quality feed will help an animal over the worst of the winter and will not discourage it from taking its own natural foods as well. These arguments then lead directly to the controversial subjects of animal condition and the ability of the Forest to support any given number of stock during the winter. On such questions there is no shortage of experts who are constantly at war with each other.

Those who do feed, whether ponies or cattle, not infrequently find themselves in conflict with their neighbours. Herds of animals loafing around the farm gate waiting for the next meal puddle the verges and dung the road. Idle moments are spent cropping the neighbour's garden hedge or rubbing on his fences. The neighbour, unless particularly interested in the Forest and its animals, is inclined to complain, but is he justified in doing so? There are again two schools of thought. The hard line, to which I do not subscribe, is that wherever you live in the New Forest, in a modern cul-de-sac road of bungalows or a remote cottage adjoining a commoner's farm, you take the consequences and like it or move away. That is an extreme attitude which I suspect few commoners would now hold. However, if you do buy the remote cottage with a farm next door (it looked nice, and clean in August) you can scarcely complain about the Forest farmer feeding his stock in the winter months. In the cul-de-sac, on the other hand, it is not unreasonable to object to the feeding of beef cattle in the garage or ponies on the front lawn. When it comes to feeding actually on the Forest, the Verderers do have power to arbitrate in disputes of this nature, although they have chosen not to exercise it in recent years. Under the byelaws, the Court may direct a commoner as to where he is to feed, presumably with the objective of avoiding undue annoyance to neighbours or damage to the Forest's fabric.

Several years ago, a resident of Bull Hill was so much annoyed by the mess made by one owner's animals and the alleged damage to hedges, that he took the commoner to court. The judge held that as this was within the commonable lands of the New Forest and, more importantly, because the commoner had done everything reasonably practicable to minimise inconvenience, the case should fail. He intimated, however, that if the commoner's attitude and activities had been less reasonable, his decision would not necessarily have been the same. It would seem therefore, that that common sense and goodwill are the best remedies for what is likely to be an increasing problem in future years.

### **THE NEW FOREST HERITAGE AREA**

There can be few more confusing planning concepts than that of the New Forest Heritage Area and its boundaries. Its problems are highlighted at present as attempts are being made to extend the heritage designation into those portions of southern Wiltshire which abut on the Forest.

Most people have little trouble in identifying the Near Forest and its boundary or perambulation, the old forest law term, which still survives in general use. If you drive into the Forest from Cadnam, the houses and bungalows cease abruptly, giving place to woods and heaths. As you leave again, at Setley, the process is reversed. The boundary is obvious and is additionally marked on unfenced roads by cattle grids. The so-called Heritage area, however, is much larger and includes a fringe or buffer zone around the Forest. Within the whole of this area, protective planning policies apply. In general, there are few lengths of the Heritage Area boundary which follow significant and readily identifiable natural features, so that to the average person who is not equipped with a stack of planning documents, this line remains a mystery and the policies applicable within it scarcely less obscure. The average person need not, however, worry. There are many people concerned in the management of the Forest who regularly demonstrate their own confusion on the subject by making the incorrect assumption that the Heritage Area is the rural and semi-urban fringe outside the perambulation, instead of what it in fact — the whole area within the Heritage Area boundary. So given that this rather clumsy designation is not exactly user-friendly, does the Heritage Area serve any useful purpose? Its objectives are entirely laudable in that they seek to curb the urban sprawl within and adjacent to the Forest and to protect in agricultural use farmland which might be used as a base for the exercise of common rights. Whether or not the sprawl can be controlled through the Heritage Area policies is a matter which lies largely in the hands of planning inspectors and their masters. The government has already indicated its distaste for the fringe element of the Heritage Area by directing a redrawing of the boundaries, perhaps in response to pressure from developers. This should add nicely to the existing confusion. The protection of farmland in agricultural use, on the other hand, is most unlikely to be achieved, because the pressures here lie beyond the control of planning powers as they exist in the Forest at present. Wholesale conversion to "horsiculture" requires no permission and is continuing apace throughout every village of the Forest and its fringe.

The planners deserve all the support we can give them in trying to resist the tide of economic, recreational and development pressures washing around the margins of the Forest. Whether or not

the Heritage Area policies will prove more than a sandcastle defence for these brave Canute's remains to be seen.

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