

NEW FOREST NOTES – MAY 2005

Further decline of the National Trust's Commons

In 2004, DEFRA scientists carried out an assessment of Half Moon Common, which is owned by the National Trust, and concluded that it is overgrazed and its vegetation declining. Now they have extended their research (published last month) to the largest of the Trust's commons at Bramshaw – Plaitford Common. Here they have reached exactly the same conclusion. They say that the vegetation "is in poor condition because of grazing with livestock at an intensity that is too high to be supported by the productivity of the vegetation. It is clear that grazing pressure has been high in the past and that this has had a detrimental effect on the heathland vegetation. The current grazing pressure does not meet the cross compliance requirements of Single Payment". This last rather cryptic sentence means that the shortcomings of management are such that subsidies cannot be paid.

DEFRA has made similar findings in respect of the adjoining common, West Wellow, which is owned by the parish council. While they have not surveyed the remaining bits of common land at Bramshaw (Furzley, Cadnam and Penn), it is obvious that the same malaise affects them as well. In non-jargon terms, the heather is being steadily wiped out by excessive grazing pressure, supplementary feeding, dunging and vehicle movements. Photographic evidence shows clearly how the destruction has advanced since the 1960s. What was once unbroken heather moorland has been reduced to close-bitten low-grade grass. That this should have happened under a management supposedly dedicated to the protection of natural beauty and to conservation (the National Trust) is particularly sad. Despite some feeble efforts (now abandoned) at reducing animal numbers, the Trust continues to preside over what is effectively the destruction of its commons. The parish council's situation is more understandable. Parishes do not normally have expertise in landscape and similar matters, but the Trust does.

Perhaps the ultimate condemnation of the Trust's management comes in DEFRA's handbook on the proper management of habitats and landscape features. Here, under a heading "Bad practice – actions to avoid", a photograph illustrating overgrazed lowland heath shows Plaitford Common north of Wicksmoor looking towards the A 36. That National Trust land should have been singled out by government for a nationally-distributed illustration of bad practice, speaks for itself.

Landscape versus conservation

Some threats to the New Forest are clear-cut and meet with united opposition from those whose business it is to protect its special qualities. Road building, excessive recreation, and phone masts are all examples of such damaging activities. It is when management has to consider more subtle changes, albeit ones which may have a significant effect on the landscape, that problems arise. Two current controversies illustrate this very well. At Sporelake Lawn, just off the main road from Lyndhurst to Brockenhurst, the Forestry Commission has recently felled very large numbers of trees in the Ancient Ornamental woods. You will not be able to see them from your car, but walk into the Forest opposite New

Park and the large extent of the work is immediately apparent. Many of the trees cut are birch and willow, but there has also been a heavier felling of oak than at any time since the notorious assault on Rushpole Wood in 1969-70. I have received more complaints about it than any other Commission management activity in the last year or so, while in the annual report of the New Forest Association there is a carefully reasoned article, by a knowledgeable local historian and committee member, questioning the fellings. On the ground, the seeming ocean of felled trunks certainly looks alarming, although the this impression is aggravated by the wise decision not to attempt any extraction under the present sodden ground conditions. So why has the Commission undertaken this apparently random attack on the old woods ?

The Sporelake fellings have nothing in common with the blatantly commercial operation in Rushpole thirty five years ago. Then, in the words of a Deputy Surveyor of a few years earlier, the Commission was seeking an opportunity of "at long last putting these woods into production". What has been done at Sporelake is an attempt to restore fragments of "forest lawn". The lawns are the important grass-covered grazing areas on which ponies and cattle depend for their better quality feed. The long fingers of lawn leading from the main green at Sporelake have been encroached-upon by broadleaved trees since the 18th Century, as part of a natural progression towards dense woodland. For once the commoners and hard-line conservationists are in agreement: the trees must go, irrespective of other interests. The contrary argument and that suggested in the NFA report, is that the A&O woods are not a static feature of the Forest. They move imperceptibly over time. Some areas die and are replaced by park and then by grassland, while others expand. Visit Denny, Bratley or Mark Ash and you will see woodland in various stages of decline. At Sporelake and Rushpole, by contrast, the woods are expanding. Should we intervene, felling natural regeneration where woods expand and fencing and replanting where they are in retreat, or should we allow nature to take her own course ? If the former, what is the date of the historical landscape we are seeking to restore ? These are difficult questions to answer and are probably best determined by the degree of work required. Few people would object to the clearance of willow and birch scrub of perhaps twenty years growth, from some valued grazing area, but the felling of oaks of up to a century old is another matter. The commoners, of course, have livelihoods to protect and I fully accept their right to press for the maximum advantage. I have much less time for the hard-line conservationists who can see no value in landscape for its own sake and who seek to manage the New Forest simply as a scientific laboratory furthering their particular interests.

A good example of this disregard of landscape has arisen concurrently with the Sporelake fellings. Near Wilverley Lodge there are two small clumps of Scots pine growing on the Open Forest. One is on the footpath leading from Yewtree Bottom towards Broadley and the second to the west of the old sawmill site near Wootton Bridge. Both are much appreciated by local walkers and visitors, but both were condemned to be destroyed by one of the Forestry Commission's advisory committees. Scots pine is a non-native tree and, in the eyes of many in the scientific community, it has no place in the New Forest and should be

totally removed. One has only to consider the number of open-grown pines which appear in picture postcards, book illustrations and even paintings of the Forest to see how far this is from the view of the general public. On my own walls hangs a print (I can't afford originals) of the beautiful Barry Peckham picture of the Cunninger Clump.

Fortunately not all scientists are nearly so blinkered. When John Lavender was curator of the Red House Museum at Christchurch, he was not only one of the most respected conservationists in the area, but was also a leading authority on landscape. He was later appointed Amenity Verderer. In the 1970s I had the privilege of working with him on a landscape assessment of Scots pine on the Open Forest. The result was a recommendation for the retention, chiefly on landscape grounds, of about 1000 individual trees and of clumps extending to 200 acres. All other Scots pine on the Open Forest was to be cleared. In the years following that report, probably as much as 2,000 acres of Scots pine has been eliminated from the Forest. It was a good compromise, supported by the commoners and the public, accepted by the Forestry Commission and tolerated by the conservation lobby.

One of the two clumps recently threatened had been specifically recommended by John for retention and the other had matured in the years since his survey. Fortunately, at a site meeting in April, the local keeper, the head keeper and the head agister all argued for their retention and good sense prevailed. The trees will be kept and only outlying regeneration will be removed. The two clumps beloved of livestock and walkers alike will be retained for future generations to enjoy.

The New Forest Trust

Last week the New Forest Trust was launched and we finally had the opportunity of discovering what this hitherto rather shadowy organization actually does and intends to do. It is a registered charity broadly designed to further the interests of people and animals living in or visiting the New Forest. Its trustees possess impeccable qualifications. They comprise a bevy of chairmen, past and present, of the Verderers' Court, the New Forest Association and the Commoners Defence, together with an earl, a retired Deputy Surveyor and an NFU employee for good measure. The Trust has already financed the rebuilding of the Beaulieu Road saleyard and has supported a scheme for improving New Forest Stallions. Both of these projects are of great value to the local farming community. Now it intends to raise and spend half a million pounds supporting affordable housing for local people, two million pounds for an "outdoor education centre", two thousand pounds a year helping pony marketing, twenty thousand pounds on research into deer, two thousand pounds on an "interactive website" and forty thousand pounds on staff. With a programme like that, certainly no-one could accuse it of lacking ambition, but it would be good to feel that there was also scope for helping the numerous small Forest groups who might benefit from a few hundred pounds for equipment, labour or research. The brochure gives the impression that the Trust's objectives are on an altogether too grand a scale to bother with such trifles, but I hope I am wrong.

I have to admit that I left the launch party at Rhinefield somewhat confused and I was not alone in that. One of the trustees had been at great pains to explain to me that the Trust would remain above local politics. That seemed to me to be a very sensible approach. It was therefore rather disconcerting to hear the principal speaker, the famous Chris Packham, describe the Trust as a forum within which important Forest issues would be debated. He went on to refer to the Lyndhurst Bypass, the possibility of controlling dog walking in the nesting season and the iniquity of high house prices. It is difficult to get more political than that. However, on my arrival home I found an email waiting for me confirming that, guest speaker notwithstanding, the Trust will definitely not soil its hands with controversy.

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