

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2007

The burning question

This spring there was rather more than the usual controversy over burning of the Open Forest by the Forestry Commission. There were allegations of wholesale slaughter of birds and eventually the Commission terminated the planned programme a little earlier than the due date, although I believe more because of concern about reptiles than birds.

Many who oppose burning probably do so more on principle than for specific conservation reasons. "It looks so horrid, doesn't it?" They dislike seeing the Forest burnt and the perceived threat to early nesting birds is a useful stick to beat the Commission with. It is one of those arguments where there is unquestionably merit on both sides, but to my mind the value of burning far outweighs the objections to it. Anti-burners say, rightly, that springs have been getting earlier and warmer. The practice of burning is, they say, putting wildlife increasingly at risk. They demand that either burning should cease altogether or that it should be undertaken in the winter. Whether or not there is a good case for ceasing burning altogether is a matter of opinion, but earlier burning is almost always an impossibility. Getting a "good burn" depends upon having a really dry upper layer of vegetation, so that as much debris and old growth as possible is consumed. The great advantage of early spring fires is that the top is dry, while the roots remain moist and thus are protected from damage. Attempts to burn in, say, January almost always fail because there is simply too much moisture in the vegetation. To understand this one need only compare attempts to light a garden bonfire in a grey January with the combustion of the same heap on a breezy March day after a period of drying winds. Apart from in the most exceptional years, the Commission is thus compelled to burn at the last moment permitted by law. This year the programme looked like being lost altogether because of continuous rain and only by a remarkable effort over a two week period was most of the target achieved. In seasons like this, the Commission's burning teams work every hour available, weekends included, to finish the job on time. In all, just under 600 acres were burnt from 12th to 25th March and the uncompleted balance will be added to next year's total.

Although we hear a great deal about what is wrong with burning the Forest, the opposite view is not always so clearly explained. Burning serves a number of purposes which, so far as I can see, are quite as much to the benefit of wildlife and the Forest scenery as they are to more practical objectives. Improvement of the grazing is usually quoted as being a primary purpose of burning and so it is. Old gorse which has not been burnt for many years will die out, removing an important feed source for livestock. It needs to be burnt before reaching this advanced stage, which old foresters used to describe as "furze sick", and then there will be a strong regrowth which is readily devoured. Coarse old heather is also relatively unpalatable to cattle, unlike the regrowth. I have heard it said that young healthy heather is less vulnerable to heather beetle attack, although it is some years since that scourge was a major problem in the Forest. As to the burnt gorse itself, it is a surprisingly

important feed in its own right. Go into any stand of burnt gorse and you will see it covered with white flecks where the singed branches and twigs have been stripped off and eaten by the animals, glad to be free of the difficult problem of prickles. Finally, within days of a burn the area is covered with a thin green carpet of easily accessible molinia shoots. Burning is thus both of long and short term benefit to grazing stock. A once highly prized by-product of burning no longer serves any purpose. The dead gorse stems, known as "black jacks" make excellent fuel and fire lighting material. The Forestry Commission permitted local people to collect them, but in an age of central heating nobody is now interested.

These days burning is carried out on a very carefully prepared programme, approved by Natural England and others. Sites to be burnt are small and a strict rotation is followed. Safety margins are cut by machine around the chosen area and the proposed burn sites are checked for wildlife problems by the Commission's own experts. I do not say for one moment that they will always get it right and no doubt there are occasional bird tragedies, but this is large scale management of a wild landscape – not the maintenance of a garden hedge containing a blackbird's nest. Some nests may be destroyed, but the potential consequences of doing nothing are far worse. Uncontrolled wild fires on a large scale were once a real problem in the New Forest. Huge areas of vegetation and its wildlife inhabitants were destroyed and, if the fire was in summer, the landscape was left blackened for years afterwards. Backley Plain was destroyed in the 1970s, Hale Purlieu a little earlier and Half Moon and Furzley took twenty years to recover from a fire in 1959 which burnt large areas of peat. A proper programme of controlled burning makes the likelihood of such devastating summer fires far more remote. A single 200 acre fire on the May bank holiday could kill far more wildlife than years of controlled burning programmes.

The final question is why not use machines instead of burning ? The answer is that this would be prohibitively costly, relatively ineffective in improving grazing and not nearly so good in landscape terms over the long term. In short, for all its disadvantages, the present system of controlled spring burning is by far the best option available and it would be a disaster for the Forest if it were to be abandoned.

If I have one criticism of the burning programme as at present undertaken, it is that less care than formerly is taken to protect old holly clumps and individual feature trees such as crab apples within the burn areas. They used to be protected by cut fire breaks, but such care is less in evidence these days and that is a pity.

Camp plans withdrawn

Last month, Forest Holidays Ltd. withdrew its controversial application to redevelop Hollands Wood Camp and to expand Round Hill. The Verderers had opposed both schemes from the start, refusing to grant the required land. They were clear and determined in championing the Forest – unlike some other public authorities who should have behaved better and who will no doubt seek to claim a share of the credit.

Over the years I have taken to celebrating the occasional Forest victories over development projects by walking the areas which were at risk. It does no harm to remind

oneself of exactly what the Forest community has been fighting for and that although we may lose more than we win, it is not all a one-way process. On this occasion I took a walk through Hollands and Ramnor Woods and around the back of Sporelake Lawn. It is an area renowned for its violets in the spring and still retaining quite a number of remarkable ancient trees. I have to admit, though, that it was not an entirely pleasurable experience, despite perfect weather and a mid-week absence of disturbance. The violets were there sure enough, but among them glinted innumerable beer cans scattered every few yards throughout the woods. The extent to which the area has been fouled by litter from the Hollands Wood Camp is quite extraordinary. One expects filth for a hundred yards or so around visitor facilities, but here the rubbish extends into the farthest recesses of the wood – areas which are never cleaned by any camp managers and never will be. If beer cans predominated, not far behind was the debris left by children building “dens” out of fallen branches. There are many of them and around each is a scatter of plastic bottles, crisp packets, old rags and whatever other play equipment they could not bother to remove. As the years go by, this debris will accumulate, layer on layer, until perhaps, Natural England has the courage to force the closure of the camp as provided for in its Conservation plan.

I have no doubt that there are some well-behaved visitors with well-controlled children who are as horrified as I am by the disgusting state of the woods adjoining the camp, but it does little to endear tourists as a whole to the local community. Still, the bracken will be up soon, hiding the rubbish from view for another year, so what does it matter ?

Incomprehensible jargon

The New Forest Report season is upon us once again and the first of this year’s bulky crop of indigestible text comes not from the usual local authority culprits, but from the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. It is a learned paper explaining how 18th and 19th Century clearance of ancient woodland in the New Forest affected the populations of rare lichens and how these losses might be made good or the effects of clearances mitigated. Its purpose seems to be to influence discussions on the Inclosures Design Plan, since it has been circulated to the members of the forum which is discussing that document.

For all I know, this may be a superb piece of scientific research, but for the layman it is so impossibly difficult to understand that it is in danger of achieving nothing at all. Few of the forum members are scientists. It does not even seek a clear line of action from those to whom it has been sent. Wildlife conservation is a very important matter, but it is about communication quite as much as research. On the evidence of this report, it should certainly not be left entirely to the scientists.

Access to commoners’ houses

In February I described the process by which commoners can obtain special planning concessions allowing them to build houses in otherwise protected areas. Since these protected areas are very often adjoining Crown lands in the Forest, there has arisen a curious problem relating to access. The Forestry Commission demands a payment for driveways across its land leading into building plots, as it is perfectly entitled to do in law. Whether it is

quite in the spirit of encouraging young commoners is another matter. Certainly the Commoners Defence Association does not think so and it asked the Verderers to take up the matter with the Deputy Surveyor.

The Commission's reply was that a commercial access charge on a building plot worth £300,000 might be in the region of £120,000 and the concessionary rate of about £3250 charged on a new "commoner's dwelling" is therefore extremely reasonable and fully demonstrates the Commission's determination to support commoning.

I suppose the reasonableness of the charge depends upon which end of the driveway one views it from.

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