

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2013**

### **The Commoners' Housing row**

The continuing disputes over commoners' housing threaten to undermine a scheme which could play a key role in the future of the New Forest. I should say at once that I am not involved with any of the committees or panels that sit in judgement on commoners' housing, but I would be very sorry to see the loss of the scheme in some form.

In simple terms this is a scheme which grants planning permission to commoners (keepers of ponies and cattle in the New Forest) to build houses for themselves in places where the average citizen would not be granted such permission. The idea behind it is that farmers and particularly their children may not be able to afford market prices in acquiring New Forest holdings and therefore need local authority support. The planning permissions are subject to certain legal constraints – partly planning and partly restrictive covenants - that bind the houses to occupation by pony or cattle keepers using the Forest and thus limiting to some extent their resale value. The conditions attached to the planning permissions are too numerous to list here and only the most important are mentioned.

Theoretically almost everyone seems to be in favour of the scheme. After all, the Forest depends on its grazing animals and without owners and stock managers there would be no animals and the Forest would become jungle. The commoners are thus, in the view of many people, in the nature of public benefactors. The problems seem to have arisen from the way the scheme is designed and administered, rather than from the objective of providing affordable housing for small farmers. No doubt there is a degree of envy involved in the opposition. "Why should commoner X who has kept five ponies for seven years receive planning permission to build on a lovely site adjoining the Forest when his neighbour's son Y, who does not have five ponies is denied such a privilege?" Such feelings, if seldom expressed in words, are inevitable, but the difficulties seem to go deeper than mere envy.

Firstly there is the question of location. It is argued by objectors that the planning authority grants permissions to qualifying commoners without proper regard for the location of the site, its effects on neighbours, the landscape and perhaps even on the fabric of the Forest itself. If that is the case (and I am sure the planners would deny it), it is at variance with the recommendations of Ms Emma Rigglesworth who carried out a review of the scheme in 2006 and who laid emphasis on the importance of judging more than just the bare qualifications of applicants. It is the concerns of neighbours that have figured most prominently in recent discussions and one must admit that commoners holdings, like all small farms, vary in quality from immaculately-kept premises at one extreme to something resembling a municipal refuse tip at the other. Few householders who have paid good money for their country home, would welcome the arrival of a neighbour from the tip category in an area which they had reasonably assumed to be protected countryside. This is perhaps a difficulty which could be overcome by restrictive covenant provisions, strictly enforced by the Park.

There is next the allegation of potential abuse of the qualification system, allowing applicants to secure what is in effect a fine equine-lifestyle house in a prime position adjoining the Forest at a very modest cost. To qualify, a commoner must have five ponies on the Forest for seven years. He must own the site and must not have access to a suitable holding elsewhere. The Park will also consider the availability of suitable holdings in the area. The applicant must have a clean animal welfare and byelaw observance record. All these, it must be admitted, are not very difficult qualifications to meet. Forest mares can be acquired for well under £100 apiece and a couple of acres adjoining the Forest might be bought for perhaps £40,000. Contrary to the belief which seems to pervade the Park offices, there is no mystique to keeping animals on the Forest. I have even heard nonsense talked about the Park running training courses in commoning ! The fact is that any reasonably intelligent riding school trainee with a basic education in equine welfare and nutrition, could keep half a dozen bucket-trained mares on the common outside her field gate. Perhaps the same might even be said of a suitably qualified Southampton banker's son ! There is nothing in the rules which allows discrimination between him and a sixth generation indigenous working commoner and no doubt such discrimination would in any case be unlawful. Old commoners would scorn such "incomer's" methods of pony keeping, but they nevertheless work and are welfare friendly. By contrast to the specified qualifications, of course, a detailed understanding of the administration, geography and history of the Forest can take a lifetime to acquire, but these are not required by the Park. Such knowledge is in any case not always present within "genuine old commoner families".

In summary, our qualifying riding school trainee or banker's son can theoretically set up an equine establishment in the form of a commoner's holding, taking care always to retain the five ponies ever thereafter. In fact I don't think there is a shred of evidence that such "abuse" has ever actually occurred.

As to the suggested opportunities for profit on resale, I again do not think there is any evidence – just speculative talk. Indeed, I am not sure that any "commoner's housing" has yet changed hands. Sales are restricted to similarly qualified "commoners" and may thus be at a little below open market value. If I have understood the rules correctly, houses may be sold freely to any qualifying and Park-approved person and the attached grazing land (which was conveyed to the Park and then leased back to the commoner at a nominal rent) will then be let to the new approved owner. If the building site was bought for £40,000 (paddock value – not building land price) and the building costs were say £100,000, an open market value of the eventual dwelling (reflecting its good location) might be £600,000. The potential profit element is thus perhaps £3-400,000.

Whether such a profit element is acceptable is not my concern. All planning consents provide a potential financial reward to their recipients, but there are perhaps questions to be answered on this score. I have recently heard it suggested that a more straightforward and controllable way of providing for the future of commoning would be along the lines of the two Forestry Commission "commoners' holdings" erected and let at Burley Lodge where the

capital value remains with a public authority and precise controls can be exercised by means of a lease. The Commission holds large areas of agricultural land in the New Forest, much of it well suited to smallholdings, but of course the building costs need to be found. Incidentally, it is one of these two cottages and not one of the houses within the scheme which appears on the Park's guidance notes and application form pack ! Such let properties would be available to a far wider group of young commoners - those who do not have the necessary funds to purchase a site and build upon it, but who would welcome the chance to rent a holding. They would also eliminate much of the conflict with local residents, because of the promise of greater control and the absence of even perceived opportunities for abuse.

#### **The last locust tree ?**

I remember reading somewhere in the records that the locust tree (otherwise false acacia) was planted experimentally in the New Forest during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the hope that it might prove a worthwhile timber tree. That experiment was not a success and by the 1880s foresters regarded it purely as an ornamental tree in this country. Traces of these early New Forest plantings are very rare now, the best examples being In Amberwood Inclosure where the remnants of a long avenue still survive, but as rather thin stunted trees. Amberwood dates from 1815, but the trees may well have been planted in other inclosures of the same period. The only other planting I know of is at Hursthill near Brockenhurst, today a very attractive mixed woodland which dates from 1808. I can't remember seeing many locust trees there in recent times, but last month the Forestry Commission cut down what may well have been the last one remaining. It grew on the north side of the Inclosure and appears to have been taken as part of a firewood getting operation in which large numbers of sweet chestnuts have been felled beside the rides. The tree could hardly have been of much value for burning and why it should have been thought necessary to fell it entirely escapes me. The felled stem was perfectly sound, so there was no suggestion of danger to the public. Perhaps it was just part of the ecological fascism which seems to demand the removal from the New Forest of so many "non-native" trees, irrespective of their historical or landscape significance. There is still surviving a small sucker or subsidiary stem from the old tree and it would be nice to think that this might be spared for the interest of future generations.

#### **An unexplained carving**

Thousands of beech trees in the Forest have had their beautiful smooth bark disfigured by penknife-wielding louts who find them an irresistible canvas for vandalism. Before WW2 the message was usually along the lines of "Bill loves Daisy". Today it is more likely to be something obscene, but as we go back in time the carvings become more interesting. In January 2008, I wrote about the government arrow timber markings of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and before, first recorded in the New Forest by Chris Read. Now an equally intriguing and more enigmatic carving has been recognized in different parts of the Forest on trees in extreme old age, so that within a few years all evidence – beyond that frozen in photographs - is likely to be lost. The first example was found some time ago in Berry Wood near Burley on a huge pollarded beech now fallen and rotted away. The next carving is on a

beech west of Fritham and last month another was found on a fairly insignificant beech (whose growth has been suppressed by adjoining trees, but which is likely to date from the 18<sup>th</sup> century) south of Lyndhurst. The carving comprises a series of interlocking "V" shapes set on their sides and is so complex that it can hardly be any sort of timber marking. The distortions from tree growth suggest that all must be at least 150 – 200 years old. Coded communication between tramps, tinkers or similar people has been suggested, but there is actually no better evidence for this than there is for the work of fairies, witchcraft or the followers of some forgotten religious sect. I should be interested to hear any other (plausible) explanations.

Anthony Pasmore