

NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2016

Holly problems

Over the years I have written several times about holly trees in the Forest, notably in 1991 and again in 2002. Holly is a much overlooked but key part of the Forest's landscape. Perhaps if all the holly trees could be counted, there would be a greater total than for either oak or beech, which are trees that come more readily to mind when the New Forest is mentioned. Today the holly, like several others of our native trees, is under threat – at least at a local level. For more than twenty years now an unexplained deterioration of holly has been visible throughout the Forest. Old trees begin to lose their leaves, particularly from the upper branches, so that many of the holly woods give the appearance of having been attacked with a chemical defoliant. Initial theories were that this damage was the result of severe winters, but that hardly seems credible now. There was also talk of disease, but so far as I know that theory was never properly investigated. In a few cases pollarding the affected trees seems to have had the effect of rejuvenating them, but this is an uncertain process which is just as likely to result in death as recovery. Seven Holms near Sluffers is a good example. This clump was pollarded in about 2000. Some of the trees died immediately, but others which had been showing marked symptoms of decline responded well and put on vigorous new growth. It is a pattern which has been repeated in many of the old holly woods, but with perhaps more deaths than successes.

Holly pollarding has been going on in the Forest for about thirty years now and it has been a constant complaint of mine that the Forestry Commission has failed to keep (or at least publish) detailed records of the areas treated, the dates of treatment, and the techniques employed in each case. We have therefore lost invaluable time in devising a strategy for saving the Forest's holly woods. Providing winter feed for the ponies has been the principal objective of the cutting work, with little thought for the future of the resource being exploited. Today, however, there are the first signs that the problem is being taken a little more seriously. In several parts of the Forest experimental plots (fully deer fenced) are being established to monitor the results of both pollarding and coppicing holly trees. Pollarding comprises cutting off the top of the tree, while in coppicing the tree is cut to ground level. In both cases the objective is to secure new growth from the level of the cut. One of these experimental plots is at Shipton Holms in the south of the Forest and in the north further enclosures are to be made at Little Wood near Picket Post. The most accessible site, however, is at Bolderwood Hollies opposite the Canadians' Cross war memorial, and it is well worth a visit. Here a large block of holly has been variously pollarded or coppiced. Part of the area has been deer fenced, excluding all grazing stock, but particularly the ponies. Outside the enclosure, coppiced holly stools have been protected with branches in an attempt to prevent new shoots being eaten off. This protection seems to have failed almost completely, as few stools show even minimal surviving re-growth. Similarly, the unenclosed pollarded trees are in a miserable state and few are likely to survive. It is a remarkable fact that in the New Forest today it is quite rare to find a holly tree whose bark has not been severely attacked by ponies. Often 70% or more of the accessible bark has been

destroyed, yet somehow many of the trees manage to hold on. If the relatively difficult-to-eat bark is thus destroyed, tender new shoots of holly are even more vulnerable.

At Bolderwood the contrast between treated trees inside and outside the enclosure could not be more marked. Those protected by the fence, whether coppiced or pollarded, have responded well with masses of new healthy shoots. The pollarded trees have produced their new growth from both ground level and from the height of the saw cuts. Further bark damage is, of course, prevented.

From these experiments it seems clear that today's record levels of browsing and grazing pressures are having a major effect on the health of the Forest's holly woods, yet there are still places where the trees seem better able to withstand the onslaught. The area around Dark Hat Wood near Eyeworth is one of these. While there is scope for more research, there is also the danger of invoking this usual New Forest excuse as a reason for inaction.

Apart from the beauty of holly trees themselves and their contribution to the Forest's landscape made by holly woods (usually called "holms") the holly has an interesting place in Forest folklore and history. Holly placenames are to be found throughout the Forest from Beaulieu to Godshill and some of these are of very ancient origin. They include Shirley Holms at Boldre, Thorney Hill Holms (both extant woods), and the delightfully-named Swigs Holm at Burley. Others, such as Matley Holms, and Backley Holms tell of woods already lost. Some names, such as Briant's Holms at Godshill, have never appeared on any published map.

Holly is reported to have been cut on a large scale as deer feed (as it is now cut for the ponies) in the time of the royal hunting forest. This is said to be reflected in the prevalence of holly woods around the old lodge sites. In such places old coppiced stools are common, but there is very little evidence for pollarding holly in the Forest's past. Of the Godshill area, then bare of trees, Percival Lewis wrote in 1811 that within living memory the district had so much holly growing upon it that "a person might mistake his road". Clearly woodland loss is not a new phenomenon, but in the Godshill case human intervention is likely to have been responsible.

Local folklore dictates that it is unlucky to carry a holly stick on a horse, a justification I can remember being used for a totally failed colt-hunt at Pinnick half a century ago. John Wise, recording New Forest provincialisms in 1862, wrote that a garrulous person was said to "rattle like a boar in a holm bush". This regularly comes into my mind during tedious Forest meetings when the same thing (usually irrelevant) is repeated for the sixth time in succession.

The non-April fool

Last month, in the depths of a particularly soggy inclosure and with a perfectly straight face, a friend told me that the South Downs National Park Authority had decided to spend £35000 of public money to encourage Park visitors to greet each other politely! Even after mentally checking that it was the 19th and not 1st April, I was still disinclined to believe the story. Google has since convinced me otherwise, reproducing perfectly serious reports in the national press. The money was spent on

consultants, on making a video, and (£8000) on recruiting teams dressed in bright colours to hold up placards saying “hello”. The designers of the scheme are apparently proud of what they are doing.

I presume that the New Forest National Park Authority has no plans for a similar “initiative” (squandering of money would better describe it) but such folly does call into question the whole basis of national park management. Perhaps here in the New Forest we could consider spending just a little more – say £50,000 – to dress the “rangers” in pixy outfits and sit them on plastic toadstools at Bolton’s Bench exhorting visitors not to feed the ponies. How much litter might have been collected in the South Downs for £35000 or, better still, how much here in the New Forest? Still, it is only taxpayers’ money and no doubt the greetings project was considered worth every penny.

An unknown neighbour from sixty-six years ago

One of the pleasures of writing about the Forest is that it occasionally prompts memories and anecdotes from people I have never met, but who have particular knowledge of some aspect of the Forest’s recent past. A recent email came from a former resident of Longbeech, although not Longbeech Cottage which figured in my February Notes. This gentleman, now seventy one years old, belonged to one of those families housed by the local authorities in the buildings of the former Stoney Cross Aerodrome. Most of these structures were Nissen huts and, because he is able to remember the number of his hut, it is possible to identify it as a former WAAF dressing room.

In a time of acute housing shortage after the last war, not least resulting from the bombing of the Southampton area, some ex-military installations in the Forest were used to provide emergency accommodation over several years. Near my present home, the buildings of the Armaments Research Department, Millersford, were used in this way by Ringwood and Fordingbridge RDC.

Since my correspondent’s hut was on the north edge of Communal Site No 1, he and I were then (1950) close neighbours, although of course we did not know it. My family lived on the southern edge of Fritham. I don’t think the Fritham children and those of the “evacuees”, as they were called, had much contact. Most of the former were from farming backgrounds, while the evacuees were mainly from the towns. Still, I think that we yokels felt a little envious of those children who had exciting lives living actually within the woods and with the endless play opportunities afforded by a great abandoned airfield complex. On the other hand, there was a good deal of friendly rivalry between the Fritham people and the evacuees for the generous crops of Forest mushrooms which the aerodrome provided in those days before the end of rationing.

My correspondent sent a delightful photograph of himself on a tricycle riding the concrete roads which are all that now remain of the camp. I don’t think I was allowed to go there, but there was still endless fun to be obtained from climbing the artificial mountains which protected the aircraft fuel tanks, playing on an abandoned bren-gun carrier at Janesmoor Pond and spinning round on the turntables from which anti-aircraft guns had been removed. Modern health and safety officials would have been appalled.

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