

## **NEW FOREST NOTES MAY 2017**

### **Au unusual spring**

The spring of 2017 has produced a crop of gorse flowers on the Forest greater than I can ever remember, with great streaks and walls of gold across the heath and beside some roads. The flowers also seem to have lasted longer than usual, perhaps due to the prolonged cold and lack of rain during April. March, on the other hand, was almost continuously damp, if not actually wet and the Forestry Commission's best attempts to complete the annual controlled burning programme were repeatedly frustrated. Such burning of the Forest is not permitted after the end of March and usually there are at least a couple of weeks of dry weather during that month which allow the job to be done. Before March, even if the weather is fine, the target vegetation often contains too much moisture to burn properly. The Open Forest Advisory Committee on the 25<sup>th</sup> April was told that whereas normally about 80%-90% of the burning programme is completed, this year only 337 acres out of the planned 650 acres could be done as one damp day followed another. That is unfortunate because burning remains the most effective way of clearing old and dying vegetation and of regenerating gorse. Of course the blackened areas look disagreeable for a little while, but in the longer term the results are much preferable to mechanical clearance. The latter is now being undertaken by a new machine called a mulcher, which has replaced the tractor-mounted swipes that were used and which are now banned because of their perceived risk to public safety during operation. The general opinion of the mulcher is that it leaves too thick a carpet of debris and that this inhibits gorse re-growth and that in any case the machine cuts too low and is unsuitable for the Forest.

From the point of view of the grazing animals, a cold dry spring presents few problems. It is constant rain on their backs, interspersed with sharp frosts, that causes loss of condition. The ponies are mostly looking very fit coming out of the winter this year, although the feed on the Forest is never very abundant until after the end of this month, so there is still time for problems to arise.

A notable success of the spring has been the capture of all but one of the known pony offenders which have been stripping bark from beech trees North West of Lyndhurst and about which I wrote in March's "Notes". Since barking seems to be a winter activity, we will not know for some months whether the removals have finally resolved the problem.

### **Curlews under siege**

Every spring the Forestry Commission and National Trust plaster the Forest with notices exhorting the public to protect ground-nesting birds by keeping dogs under close control, and every year the message is completely ignored by a large section of the dog-owning public. In other parts of the country on public access land designated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act, the public must keep all dogs on a short lead from 1<sup>st</sup> March to 31<sup>st</sup> July (to protect birds) and at any time of the year when in the vicinity of livestock. Here in the New Forest the Forestry Commission has chosen not to afford to wildlife and grazing animals the same basic protection. They and the National Park clearly regard such protection as of little interest and certainly subservient to the demands of public

recreation. Pious appeals for restraint such as that made by the Park's recreation manager on 7<sup>th</sup> April are thus hypocritical. The Park and the Forestry Commission both know perfectly well that such pleas will be ignored wholesale.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April I was walking near Rushpole Pond just north of Beaulieu and on the margins of the pond a pair of curlews was minding its own business. Two women then crossed the footbridge from the King's Hat car park with two dogs, one of which was on a lead and yelping continuously. The other was loose and soon running through the bog driving the birds before it from one place to another, while the first dog kept up its constant barking for a good quarter of an hour. Eventually the mayhem subsided as the owners and their pets made their way up to Culverley Reseeded, only to be replaced by a commercial dog walker from the same car park. Again one dog was on a lead, but the remainder of the pack was running loose. The birds had no chance whatever and the decline in the species lamented by the Park's recreation manager can only be a preliminary to extinction in the New Forest if the authorities continue to sit on their hands and to rely on notices and exhortations which are so widely ignored.

### **Lyndhurst bypass**

At the Verderers' Court on 19<sup>th</sup> April, two presentments were made on the subject of a bypass for Lyndhurst. I am told that the raising of this subject at the present time was probably not unrelated to the forthcoming local government elections. Of course there are no rules which prohibit such issues being brought before the Verderers, but political point-scoring is not likely to attract a great deal of sympathy from members of the Court whose primary duty is to protect the Forest. Still, since it is now a good many years since the subject was last discussed in detail by the Verderers, it may be worth considering a little of the history of this road-building project.

Prior to the last war, a part of an inner bypass close to the village was actually started and then abandoned uncompleted. Many years later an attempt was made to revive the bypass project, but this time on a line deep in the Forest, causing the maximum damage to the grazing, the scenery, peace and quiet and ecology. Unsurprisingly the Forest community dug in its heels and said no. Eventually the County Council, sensing that the opposition could not be defeated by the use of existing statutory procedures, attempted to subdue their opponents by promoting a parliamentary bill. That bill was defeated and the council retired hurt, never to return to either negotiation or bludgeoning. In 2007 it set up a committee to consider the bypass question and that concluded that the opposition was so solid that there was no prospect of taking the matter further.

At the time of the defeated bypass bill, the Verderers had indicated that they might be favourably disposed towards an application for an inner route, but local enthusiasts branded such an idea as "not a proper bypass" and there the idea ended. I cannot predict what view the present Court might adopt towards an inner route, but that probably hardly matters. Today Natural England gets in a most furious state over perfectly reasonable requests for a few square metres of Forest land and I

hardly think it would tolerate a new layby outside Lyndhurst, let alone a vast new road swallowing many hectares.

As a former (short term) Lyndhurst resident and someone who worked for many years in an office fronting onto the High Street there, I can readily appreciate why the subject causes such anguish in the village, but the last real chance of securing a route was killed off long ago – not by the Forest interests, but by the “not a proper bypass” lobby.

### **Underground electricity lines**

The Verderers are constantly bombarded with damaging development proposals requiring little bits of land or easements within the Forest. Where possible such applications are resisted or amended so as to reduce their effect, but the process is an unending and depressing one. It is therefore a great relief when a proposal is put forward which would actually reduce the amount of urban infrastructure on the Open Forest. Such events are very rare, but at the April Court the Verderers were given the first details of a scheme for “undergrounding” electricity cables south and west of Burley. The project is in the early stages of planning, but should involve the removal of 6600 metres of overhead line from near Castle Hill, south to Long Pond and then parallel to Holmsley Bog as far as Holmsley Station. Two branch lines, each side of Shappen Hill, would be included. This does not mean that trenches would be dug across the Forest on the same lines. All but a short length of the new underground cables would be adjacent to highways on entirely new routes, but leading to the original destinations.

### **Coastal path – Highcliffe to Calshot**

The government is engaged on a plan to create a new path to facilitate public access to the coast and plans are advancing for the section from Highcliffe to Calshot. Whether this is a good thing for the tranquillity of the countryside and the farmers and householders whose land will be affected, is not a matter that directly concerns New Forest management. No doubt those involved will be able to speak for themselves. However, where the path intrudes on Forest land, as it might do at Hilltop Heath, it becomes the direct concern of the Verderers. Here the draft plan shows the path emerging from Moonhills Gate (actually about three miles from the coast) and running down the edge of the heath, either up against the boundary of private land or on the road, as far as the grid on Summer Lane leading to Exbury, where it leaves the Forest. Since this constitutes a new recreational facility, it needs the consent of the Court, and the Verderers are very unhappy about it. The plan is one more in the series of pin pricks which individually have little effect, but which collectively are part of the steady degeneration of the Forest into a recreation-dominated suburban park. Already we have the Solent Way following the road from Beaulieu to Dibden Purlieu. This also the authorities had originally tried to lay out across the heath, a scheme resisted by the Verderers. Apart from the cumulative effect of such small schemes as this, there is the likelihood of more physical wear, more litter and more verge parking as users seek to access the path part of the way along its route. If such a path has to be built, it will at least limit the damage if it can be kept off Forest land and it seems to the Court that

alternatives are readily available. Negotiations are continuing, but this looks like one of those cases where the Verderers will need to take a firm stand.

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