

NEW FOREST NOTES - MAY 1990

Depastured sheep cause distress

This year's visitors to the New Forest have a chance of seeing more than, just the traditional ponies and cattle grazing beside the roads beside. For the first time in perhaps two hundred years, the right to turn out sheep is being exercised on a large scale by a commoner at Godshill. Sheep were not normally commonable in a royal forest, but a few properties which were once controlled by religious houses, do carry sheep rights. Most are in the Beaulieu and Fawley areas, but there are also one or two farms near Fordingbridge which possess the right and it is the owner of one of these holding, who has decided to turn out a flock.

In doing so the commoner is acting perfectly properly, but his enterprising activities have caused a good of distress to many local residents whose fences were designed to withstand ordinary Forest stock — not the burrowing and squeezing antics of sheep. The rule in the Forest is, of course, that you must fence, your own land against lawfully depastured stock. Some residents and farmers have complained bitterly to, the Verderers of the huge extra fencing costs they will have to bear. Even the Verderers themselves were caught out by the sudden appearance of the sheep as no sheep marking fee (a payment, for grazing) had been fixed this century. Now it has been determined at £5 per head based upon charge suggested in the New Forest Act of 1877, updated in the same proportion as the fees for ponies and cattle.

In fact one or two very small groups of sheep have grazed the Forest in recent years under permission from the Verderers, but in areas where they could cause no trouble and as part of a ragwort control experiment. The flock at Godshill, on the other hand, is there by right and not subject to the same controls. If their owner makes a success of, the venture, the ecological consequences for the Forest could be profound. Local residents, however, will be more immediately concerned with the salvation of their gardens and crops.

The National Trust's New Forest

Most people know that the New Forest belongs to the State (in the person of the Minister of Agriculture) and is administered by the Forestry Commission, but that is not the whole story. The National Trust owns some significant and very beautiful areas of common land at Bramshaw, Hightown and Hale, all of which is indistinguishable from the so-called "Crown land". Until recent years this ownership was not much publicised and the Trust adopted a fairly passive role in management. Now, however, they have an enthusiastic and active warden in the shape of Philip Marshall, and regular walkers on the commons will have noticed some subtle but important changes.

Footpath and bridge maintenance has improved and the eradication of Scots pine and rhododendron has made steady progress. Regular guided walks are organized and a new management committee covering all the Trust's Forest properties has been established. A well attended meeting at Bramshaw last month received the first annual report from this committee together with plans for its future work.

Unfortunately there are other commons within the Forest which are under neither National Trust nor Forestry Commission management. Some, such as Ibsley, survive reasonably well, but others, including Hyde and Gorley Hill, are overrun by motor vehicles and are degenerating into dirty and eroded car parks. For such areas the future seems bleak.

Houses for Commoners?

The vexed subject of how to house local people, especially those who farm the Forest, has been exercising the minds of the planning authorities and New Forest Commoners' Defence Association over recent months. There is probably now not much dispute that the commoners and their animals are essential to the survival of the New Forest, but there remain two apparently insoluble problems in maintaining the present agricultural system.

Firstly, we somehow have to make it pay, and secondly, houses and land have to be made available at affordable prices or rents for those who do (the actual farming or "commoning" as it has come to be called). Should we, for example, allow strict green belt restraints to be relaxed so that commoners can build houses on their own land to accommodate children who will carry on the family tradition? Certainly, most commoners' children have no chance of competing successfully in the furious yuppie-driven property market of the New Forest.

But even with such a seemingly sensible compromise there are problems. There is no straightforward legal mechanism by which such a holding can be tied to commoning as opposed to plain agricultural use. Without such ties, there is nothing to stop the holding being sold off and the Forest will have achieved nothing. Similarly, how are the merits of a commoner's application to be judged? The Commoners' Defence Association has laid down suggested guidelines specifying the number of animals to be turned out and the length of time over which the applicant must have been exercising rights. The guidelines are a sincere attempt to prevent abuse of the system, but the Association and (no doubt) the New Forest planners have been dismayed by a recent appeal decision allowing a new house in a case which neither considered justified.

Now plans are afoot for a trust or similar organization to provide suitable holdings on a shared equity basis, but this scheme also is far from easy to establish. Meanwhile, the little commoners' holdings of thirty years ago change hands for £500,000 and are filled with shiny riding horses, Japanese Land Rovers, and ranges of looseboxes. The commoner continues his withdrawal to the housing estates of Totton.

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