

New Forest Notes – May 1991

OFFICIAL ENCROACHMENTS

For some years before and immediately after the Second World War, public authorities looked on the New Forest as a cheap source of land on which to establish disagreeable operations which were always resisted by private landowners. Chief among these uses were the rubbish tips which disfigured such areas as Longdown and Ocknell. Run-off from the latter site for many years polluted the headwaters of the Lymington River (Highland Water).

During the 1970s the Verderers' Court, to its credit, steadily tightened the screw on the responsible authorities and the dumps, sewage works and gravel diggings were closed down one by one. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about these sites was that most were quite illegal and had been permitted or ignored by the Forestry Commission and the Court without any statutory authority, largely under cover of the wartime emergency. Today very few unauthorised operations remain on the Forest. There are two industrial sites for which I know of no statutory authority, although they are reputedly held on lease from the Forestry Commission, and a solitary tip remains at Setley. This site, fenced off from the surrounding Forest, comprises the remains of a much larger dump formerly occupied by the local authorities and very poorly reinstated in phases over the years. All that remains is held by the Hampshire County Council and is used for storing road materials. This is patently an encroachment on the Open Forest and for years the Verderers have been pressing the County to relinquish the site — so far without success. Ultimately, of course, the Court could exercise its powers under the New Forest Acts to enquire into the encroachment and deal with the offender, but it is still hoped that reason will prevail and that the County will follow the example of earlier encroachers. At the same time the contaminated and litter-strewn surroundings require attention if they are not to disfigure the Forest for all time.

Lawn mowings

If you are tempted to regard the juicy contents of your mower grass box as a fine meal for the Forest animals, please think again. Grass cuttings thrown into the Forest are, in fact, a lethal poison to the livestock and can result in an agonising death if the victim is not treated in time. I don't know the biological processes involved, but I have seen the suffering caused by eating mowings and I do not want to do so again. The dying sheep in the film of Hardy's "Far from the Madding Crowd" are a good illustration of the symptoms.

In the past the operators of sports grounds in the Forest have been among the chief offenders in throwing out mowings and in my own village one commoner regularly searched the bushes surrounding the cricket field to collect up the concealed heaps of cuttings. Of course, the same warning applies to any garden,

refuse, much of which contains poisons of various sorts. It hardly needs saying that anyone depositing such refuse on the Open Forest is committing an offence against the bye-laws.

Sheep problems again

Angry residents of the Forest's northern parishes attended the recent general meeting of the New Forest Association to seek advice on continuing problems with sheep. Their difficulties arise out of the vexed question of fencing and the residents' obligation to fence out lawfully depastured stock on the Forest. They argue, and not unreasonably, that it is one thing to fence against ponies and cattle which have been run on the Forest continuously for generations and quite another to fence against sheep depastured under the authority of a right which has not been exercised to any material extent this century and probably for much longer. Sheep, of course, require a much higher standard of fencing than larger livestock. They ask, again with some justification, if it is equitable to dig up and exercise a long disused right, thus inflicting substantial costs on innumerable people who are in all other respects strong supporters of the Forest system. These are the sort of questions to which there are no satisfactory local answers. Whether the Verderers or anyone else approve or disapprove of the exercise of sheep rights, the animals will remain for as long as the owner wishes to turn them out and the residents must pay to exclude them from their fields and gardens or take the consequences. The law is not made or altered in Queen's House at Lyndhurst, but public opinion for or against commoning is something that all who love the Forest ignore at their peril. I fear that the sheep flock is doing little for the corporate image of the commoners. The meeting was also given some most interesting facts and figures about sheep. Firstly, although only one commoner is now exercising the right with a flock near Godshill, there are many thousands of acres which have sheep rights attached, mostly in the south east of the Forest. Secondly, while the exercise of sheep rights is entirely new in this century, there were at times as many sheep on the Forest during the last two decades as there are today. However, these sheep grazed by very strictly controlled licences granted by the Verderers. The licences were granted for the depasturing of sheep in specified areas where they would have the minimum damaging effect on nearby property and the permits could be withheld at the discretion of the Court. The licences were intended as much for the benefit of the Forest as for the convenience of the sheep owners, as sheep can and will eat ragwort, a poisonous weed which infests many parts of the Forest, especially grassland. The principal areas then grazed were at Longwater where there are few private houses nearby and at Sloden Reseeded with only the village of Fritham in the vicinity. Since Fritham is a long established pig keeping area of the Forest, such private fences as there are were already pig and sheep proof or should have been.

It is arguable if the sheep did in fact improve the ragwort problem, but from the owners' point of view there was insufficient economic incentive and the licences were not renewed.

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