

## New Forest Notes – May 1996

### Character trees versus timber production

During last month, the dispute over the management of the Forest's ancient plantations was taken an important stage further as the New Forest Association issued a report into the forthcoming fellings. The document has been prepared by Colin Tubbs (lately chief officer in the New Forest for English Nature) and his wife Jennifer. Both are members of the Association's council and retirement has evidently not dampened Colin's enthusiasm for the Forest. They have examined each inclosure in great detail and have covered 75% of this year's thinning. The results are disturbing.

Tubbs' survey reports that most of the character trees within the threatened Inclosures are marked for felling. In other words, distorted, leaning and picturesque trees, ancient beeches, and trees of species with no timber value are all to be cut out in favour of straight commercial timber. Many ancient ride-side trees are marked, as are those on the old Inclosure bank at Bramshaw Wood. Indeed, some of the worst proposed excesses are to be found in that wood where most of the rowan, whitebeam and ash is to be felled and where trees growing in pairs (including those old trees which predate the Inclosure) are to be split up by felling one. The surveyors conclude that the plan will "gravely damage the beauty of the wood".

They are equally forthright in their condemnation of the work proposed for other parts of the Forest and, when it is recalled that Colin Tubbs is the author of the leading textbook on the Forest's history and ecology, and that he speaks from over thirty years' experience of the woods and their management, this is altogether a very damning report. He concludes that the Forestry Commission is, apart from ignoring the ecology and beauty of the Forest, acting unlawfully so far as Section 8 of the New Forest Act 1877 is concerned. That is the section which requires protection of the ancient woods and trees. My own assessment suggests that they also intend violation of Section 6 of the Act which prohibits clear felling.

After twenty years in which there has been only the occasional minor dispute over woodland management, it is sad to see the old commercial dragon again rearing its head with the prospect of yet another period of intense conflict such as occurred in the 1870s, in the 1920s and most recently in 1968. However, it is exactly to meet such challenges as this that the New Forest Association exists and, contrary to what happened in 1968 this time the Association has not been slow to act.

### Litter

At this time of year, when local residents devote a great deal of time and effort to clearing up rubbish through the Forestry Commission's "New Forest Pride Week", it is worth reflecting on just how disgusting much of the Forest has become over the last two or three years. Litter has always been a problem, especially within car parks and along road edges, but the really frightening development is its spread throughout the innermost recesses of the Forest — a phenomenon which has become increasingly obvious as the Commission has opened up more and more quiet areas to intensive pressure. At this time of year (late April), the extent of the problem is very apparent, before the bracken gives temporary cover to the mess. By far the most serious contamination comes from drink cans, once more or less confined to the recreation sites, verges and youth trekking routes, but now widely distributed along many paths and most gravel roads. They are even beginning to turn up all across the heath. Next to the cans come crisp packets, polythene and the detritus accompanying makeshift latrines beside fallen trees and upturned root plates. None of this filth is cleared and the effect of several years' accumulation is depressing. This Spring, I have been looking particularly at the extent to which controlled burning of the heath is able to clear rubbish. Unfortunately it is only in the hottest fires that the aluminium cans are completely melted and even plastic is only partially destroyed.

Bad as things are on the heath, the woods are no better. I recently paid two visits to Witley Wood, between Lyndhurst and Brockenhurst, after not having been there for many months. Right through the wood from the car park to Hurst Hill Inclosure, there is a frightening density of rubbish, particularly polythene. At one point there had evidently been a jolly picnic with dozens of cans and glass bottles scattered through the undergrowth.

So far as I can see the Forestry Commission is not doing nearly enough to tackle this problem. I know there is some clearance carried out in the main honeypot sites, but nothing effective is being done elsewhere — especially in dealing with the growing scatter of rubbish through the Forest as a whole. It really is not good enough simply to exploit the goodwill of public spirited local people through Pride Week. The Commission is responsible for eight to ten million day visits per year. If only one in five of those visitors drops rubbish (say three items per visit), we can expect an average of nearly one hundred items of litter per acre throughout the whole 65,000 acres of the Forest per year. Of course there can be endless arguments about the number who drop litter and the amount they drop, but I suspect that these random figures are in fact an underestimate of the problem. They take no account of the litter dropped by locals (very considerable in some areas), the constant rain of rubbish from lorries heading for the Pound Bottom dump and from road traffic generally, especially near the A 31. Large volume fly tipping, disgusting as it is, is by comparison a fairly small scale problem. In one Forest-edge village where I collect rubbish fairly regularly, I am sure the visitor contribution is small. The worst contaminated area is round the village school (crisp packets), and at a

favourite dog walking park, (cigarette packets), and in a residential road fronting the Forest where the litter receives a weekly boost from leaking or dog- ravaged dustbin bags.

Bearing in mind the considerable tourist income derived from the camp sites, it is surely time that a permanent team was employed to clear the Forest as a whole, working methodically through it one grid square at a time and not merely cleaning the honeypots.

### **Managing the Ancient woods**

The Forestry Commission is engaged in a study of the uninclosed ancient woodland of the Forest (not to be confused with the plantations), with a view to evolving a management strategy. This will no doubt be preceded by the inevitable glossy-covered report. The study involves an officer specially employed for the purpose, a very fancy computer which produces maps showing endless combinations of characteristics of the woods which all seem agreed will be very helpful in practical management, and some substantial funding from ESSO. Discussions so far have been dominated by scientists for whom the woods are an invaluable open air laboratory. Their concerns range from invertebrates living in and on dead wood, through the processes of natural regeneration and its control by browsing, to the survival of rare lichens which depend on the continuity of ancient woodland on the same site over vast periods of time.

Amid all this highly technical talk, I suggested that the committee should at least give some consideration to the characteristics of the woodland which make it valued as a place of quiet and beauty. After all, the preservation of these woods in the 19th Century owed little to ecology which was then in its infancy as a science, but a great deal to aesthetics, then much better understood than today. After a moment's surprised silence, the members of the committee exclusively ecologists and professional foresters (with the exception of me) readily agreed to the proposal. All members were invited to set down in writing their views on the aesthetic value of the ancient woods so that they could be thrown into the balance-alongside such delights as epiphytic bryophytes.

Surprisingly, it is not nearly so easy as one might suppose to define those elements of the ancient woods which many of us value, but few have thought about analysing. In the end I decided that anything which contributed to the naturalness of the wood — ancient distorted trees, browse lines created by the ponies and cattle, varied understorey, irregular outline of the wood in the landscape and so on — was important. In other words, although the woods have been subject to constant influence by man, that appears not to have been the case, and in this lies much of their value. Conversely, any signs of blatant human intervention such as extraction damage, fencing, camp sites and drainage cuttings detract from the value. This does not mean that there can be no place for some of these detracting factors, but simply that their costs as well as benefits must be taken into account. In rare cases, for example, fencing may be necessary and its adverse effects may be outweighed by the value of the regeneration it secures on some special site.

It remains to be seen if any notice will be taken of this non-scientific approach. In the end I expect the bugs and beetles will be triumphant and the common man's perception of the woods will take second place. Fortunately the areas of conflict between these two views of management are likely to be limited.