

## **New Forest Notes – May 1997**

### **Colt-hunting under pressure**

AT their April committee meeting the Verderers had before them a report on one of those problems which strikes at the heart of the Forests traditional farming practices and which threatens to become worse still. The agisters have reported growing conflicts between colt hunting and the public's use of the Forest for recreation.

For those unfamiliar with the Forest, colt hunting is not a new form of "blood sport" designed to reduce the surplus pony population. It is the method by which the commoners catch their semi-wild ponies for management purposes. For example, a pony may be need for sale or for veterinary treatment. Not surprisingly, the ponies resist all attempts at capture and they have to be rounded up by a handful of riders whose business it is to outwit and outrun the quarry. Wherever the fleeing pony goes, they must follow and this invariably leads to a furious gallop, at least in the early stages. As the pony tires or is brought under control the pace may lessen, but a momentary, lapse of concentration can start the whole process over again as no opportunity to break free is missed.

It is a practice which has probably going on in the Forest for as long as there have been ponies there. In the old days it was completely safe -- except for those taking part. The Forest was empty and wild, No-one was encountered during a colt hunt, except perhaps the odd Forest worker or local cottager who would have understood very well what was happening and would have had the good sense to keep out of the way. It is very different today with every corner of the Forest packed with dog walkers, picnickers, cyclists, runners and bird watchers. They are walking about, hunting in bushes, climbing trees and even lying concealed in the heather. Through this congested recreation ground the commoner must follow his pony at speed or abandon any attempt at proper management. The dangers are obvious and so is the injustice of the situation for those whose pony breeding activities seem under pressure from every direction.

At first this was a problem of the weekends and that was bad enough for the agisters. They rely largely on voluntary help in their colt hunting and during the larger scale summer drifts (round ups). Because almost all commoners have other jobs, that help is often only available at the weekends when the Forest is at its most packed. Now, even on weekdays, the pressure is increasing.

Of course it is not the fault of the visitors that they are in the way. It is just another example of too many people trying to squeeze too much out of a small and over-used open space in a densely populated part of the country. There is, I suppose, no solution. For those who do find themselves in the path of what may look and sound like, an attacking Red Indian war party, the only advice must be to keep quiet and, if possible out of the way. Shouting at the riders, waving your arms at the

Ponies or letting the dog run loose will certainly not help matters. In the case of drifts (which will be starting in about three months), warning notices are placed on roads in the vicinity on the day of the event. It is then better to find another part of the Forest for your

picnic or country walk. Spectators put themselves and the participants at risk and make the task of the organisers even more difficult.

### **The Water Copse Ram**

In the March "Notes" I asked for information on the remains of the hydraulic ram in Water Copse Inclosure. Several helpful people with long memories contacted me, the most precise information coming from Mrs. S. Abbott of Lyndhurst. She was born in Brockenhurst, living in Martins Road, and childhood walks with her father to Queen Bower were a regular event. Their route sometimes took them through Water Copse where Mrs. Abbott clearly remembers the thumping of the ram. She confirms my suspicion that its purpose was to pump water up to New Park. All this was before 1920, but by the 1930s the masonry was broken and the pump silent. Brockenhurst village children had evidently delighted in the ram and named it "Billy Bump"!

Following Mrs. Abbotts letter I went to Bolderford to look more closely at the remains. This was once regarded as one of the beauty spots of the outstanding New Forest. It featured in hundreds of picture post cards, book illustrations and engravings. That is all in the past. Today it is a dirty and sordid place. The river banks are worn bare of vegetation by over use and the density of litter is incredible. Crisp packets and polythene bags extend far into Goldsmiths Hill, much of the rubbish presumably emanating from the camping in New Park. The brick ruins of the ram installation are filled with beer cans and other filth.

Of the two structures surviving, the upper one (some distance from the river) is presumably a collecting tank drawing its water by underground pipe from somewhere upstream and perhaps intended to provide the ram with a greater head of water than could be obtained direct from the river along side. The lower brick ram house still contains the remains of the engine, but is dilapidated and over grown. It would be an interesting and probably not too expensive project to restore the system to working order, but whether it could ever be protected from vandalism is another matter.

### **Purlieus**

Perhaps for the first time in its existence, the small portion of unremarkable heathland which adjoins my village figured in the national press and on television last month. The reason was that it belongs to the National Trust and is, or was, the only piece of their on which the New Forest Buckhounds had a licence to hunt. That licence was brought to an end by the Trusts decision on April 10th to ban deer hunting on its land - hence the first and probably last national interest in Hale Purlieu. On the remaining lands of the National Trust in the New Forest, the Buckhounds had presumably never considered hunting worthwhile.

I have lived close to the Purlieu for nearly thirty years and I cannot ever remember actually seeing the Buckhounds exercising their rights under the licence, although no doubt they came onto the common from time to time. This is in marked contrast to the Forest proper where one encounters them regularly during the winter. Since the Purlieu is so small and surrounded on three sides by residential development, I suppose it did not present a very attractive proposition for hunting over. I cannot see the hunt losing any sleep over the loss of

the licence itself: it is the symbolism of the ban which will be of importance to both sides in the hunting debate. Both pro and anti hunting factions may see it as the fall of the first domino. By the time these notes appear, the future of the real prize - the right to hunt in the Forest itself (and not only by the Buckhounds), may have been determined. The Labour Party has, apparently intimated that all hunting will be banned on government land if it wins the election. There has been a good deal of discussion in the Forest as to whether this is simply a "politicians" promise which be swallowed up by a lengthy committee of enquiry. The National Trusts ban makes such an outcome rather less likely.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Verderers Court which was born out of New Forest hunting, now has no say whatever in the matter. Only the title is ancient. Almost all the Verderers powers are modern administrative ones. The Court has therefore maintained a steadfast neutrality on the subject of hunting for many years, despite occasional pressure from both sides. The Verderers have enough controversial issues to resolve without clutching at that very hot potato. I doubt whether presentments from one side, threatened for the May Court, will succeed in dislodging the Verderers from the security of a policy which has served them very well.

The unfortunate officer who is responsible for hunting or its absence in the Forest is the Deputy Surveyor. Indeed one of his not too distant predecessors was a leading authority on the subject. Modern day holders of the office are more circumspect. However the present Deputy Surveyor may have cast his vote in the election, I am sure he will be praying for a clear and final directive from above, one way or the other, which will relieve him from his uncomfortable position between the warring parties.

All this may seem very remote from the title "purlieu" above. In fact it has a remarkable and ironic relevance to the National Trusts decision in relation to Hale Purlieu. Under Forest Law (the purpose of which is to protect hunting), a purlieu was an area once reserved for hunting as part of a royal forest, but which was later disafforested, i.e., the imposition of the law was removed. Hale Purlieu is a true purlieu in the sense of having once been within the Forest in the 13th Century and then removed from it. In a practical if not legal sense, history has repeated itself. Other purlieus such as Bruins and Ogdens are named more in the loose shakespearean sense of a clearing or enclave of private land within a Forest.

Those things happened a long time ago, but if the sun is finally setting on hunting in the New Forest, it is worth reflecting for a moment that it was hunting that created the Forest in the first place and then sustained it for centuries afterwards. Its legacy to all of us who use the Forest today has been a priceless one, whether we support or oppose the practise at the present day.

### **Brand Deposits**

The Verderers have agreed that, because of the administrative difficulties, the £50 deposit payable on the registration of a new brand will be refunded as soon as stock bearing that brand are depastured. Formerly the payment was refunded out of marking fees paid and, especially in the case of a small cow keeper on the Adjacent Commons paying 75p per cow,

the process could take a long time and was very complicated. The purpose of the deposit is to deter the registration of brands by people who have no intention of using them, but fancy the image of possessing a New Forest brand.