

NEW FOREST NOTES NOVEMBER 2012

Disputed Forest roads

The closure of the B3078 road between Brook and Longcross (near Fritham) has focussed attention on the long-running dispute between the Verderers and commoners on one side and the highway authority for the New Forest (Hampshire County Council) on the other. The highway engineers are intent on making smoother more stable roads throughout the district, while to Forest interests such improvements represent an invitation to motorists to increase speeds and thus kill more ponies and cattle. The argument centres on road widening and what actually constitutes widening. The policy of the engineers is to strengthen the margins of the roads, eroded as they are through constant pounding by heavy lorries and immense volumes of car traffic. This frequently involves the excavation of the verges and the laying of concrete under them to support the road edge. The soil is initially replaced, but is quickly removed again by wheels, exposing the new foundations which then become part of the road. If there is a significant drop-off from the "official" road, the margins are then filled with tarmac "for safety", but in any case the road has effectively been widened without the consent of the Verderers or the Forestry Commission. Thereafter the traffic exerts wider pressure on the verges and the whole process repeats itself in time. Even where new foundations are not laid under the verges, erosion at the edges is commonly filled with tarmac along considerable distances, widening the driving surface. This is the so-called "stealth widening" - a term coined by the Forest, but now even finding a place in the draft official maintenance plan.

Once stealth widening has occurred, we go through a well established ritual. The Verderers complain to the highway authority and the authority promises to remove the encroachment. In fact it does nothing and the Court eventually moves on to other less intractable subjects. The County Council has successfully achieved its widening without consent and without having to remove their new works. In 2009, such encroachment occurred in Forest Road at Burley and other notable examples occurred at Bramshaw and Hale. Only in Linwood did the Verderers manage to achieve a token removal of tarmac. The official attitude seems to be "Don't worry about those Verderers. They will squeak a bit at first, but if we do nothing they will soon forget all about it".

All this brings us to the case of the B 3078, one of the Forest's old turnpike roads which has probably not been fully reconstructed since its horse and cart days in the 19th century. Some years ago its margins were dug up and replaced with grass-cell blocks. These are concrete blocks containing a network of pockets filled with soil, from which grass is supposed to grow, making an attractive road margin, but also a safe one for driving on in emergency. In fact the intensity of traffic on the B3078 effectively prevents much grass growth, but the blocks have been fairly successful in limiting the spread of vehicles onto the adjoining grass. Unfortunately they were laid on an insecure base and the road margins are now breaking up wholesale - hence the closure for repairs. Inevitably the "repair" will include the laying of concrete under the verges beyond the blocks and the cycle of stealth widening

will probably start all over again. No consent for this work had been given by the Court when the work started on 15th October and, so far as I know, Forestry Commission approval was also not granted by that date.

Air photographs of the New Forest

One of the great local benefits of the internet is to make available to everyone remarkable sets of air photographs of the Forest. Many have to be paid-for, but why anyone should buy is quite beyond me when some of the best quality images are available free of charge. Only a few years ago, anyone who wanted to see aerial views of the Forest had rely on a collection of black and white images made for the Nature Conservancy in the 1960s or, rather better, the wartime RAF pictures which were often of superb quality. Much fuss has been made about the German photos of the early 1940s, but they are by comparison with the British pictures, of very poor quality, small scale and sometimes obscured by cloud. No doubt the pilots were not over-anxious to fly low enough or to spend much time about their business, just in case the RAF was around to try killing them. The German photos do have a very specialized use in that they show the Forest before the making of the re-seeded areas and most military installations, but they are otherwise uninteresting except as curiosities.

Today we are spoilt for choice in Forest aerial photography. There is a full set of photographs on the National Park website, but unfortunately they are ruined by being covered all over with a sort of watermark including the Park's logo and making them virtually useless. There is no such nonsense with the freely available photograph sites of which by far the best is Bing Maps (www.bing.com/maps) . This not only gives a vertical view of excellent quality, but also oblique pictures (birds-eye view), with the latter sometimes taken at a different season. The winter and early spring pictures, although less colourful, give a much more detailed view of the Forest because of the absence of leaf and bracken.

One remarkable feature of the Bing photos is that throughout the great flat expanses of heath from Ocknell Plain in the north to Beaulieu Heath in the south, it is possible to discern faint traces of an irregular chess board pattern engraved in the heather. This is most clearly visible just to the north of Hatchet Pond. I suppose that at first glance it might be taken for the surviving remnants of a forgotten agricultural landscape made up of dozens of small fields, but in fact its origin is of much more recent date. The squares are a network of defences dug early in World War II to prevent aircraft (presumably gliders) from landing in the event of an invasion. All were filled in after the war and some during it (for example to allow for the construction of Beaulieu Aerodrome), but sufficient unevenness survives to show up on air photos. Although today they are no more than faint shadows, on the 1940s RAF pictures they divide the heath with brilliant white lines where the unvegetated subsoil was left exposed by the excavators. On the basis of prevention being better than cure, no doubt it was quite intentional that the traps should be clearly visible to the enemy.

A disappointing electoral register

Despite valiant efforts by the Verderers' staff, the number of voters on the electoral register for the Court has again declined this year. Because it was clear that many practising

commoners were not included in the previous register, a circular was sent to all those “missing” voters, based on an analysis of the old register and the current marking fee books, reminding them of the need to register in order to secure a vote. Instead of the hoped-for increase, the number on the roll declined by about 9% from 840 in 2009 to only 756 this time. By contrast, in 1967, the number of electors reached 1202. I don’t have figures for later years, but on average the register has declined steadily in recent times. This is in contrast to a rise in the number of commoners turning out and an increase in the stock on the Forest. Such lack of interest is difficult to account for, but it does seem to affect the farming community rather than other voters. Many local residents take a keen interest in the Forest, as witness the recent upsurge of public opinion over Latchmore Brook and the Forestry Commission’s plans for it. Anyone occupying at least one acre of land with common rights may vote and that opens the register to most residents with a large garden or pony paddocks. Such people of course are as much entitled to vote as the working commoner, but it is he who benefits directly in financial terms from the Court’s decisions on subsidies or has to pay when the marking fees increase. When the Forest is damaged by development or misuse, it is his grazing which suffers, yet his interest in the Court seems to decline at each election. This is also reflected in the open sessions of the Court when, usually, only two or three commoners are present, with the remainder of those attending being Forest residents, Forestry Commission staff taking a Wednesday morning break from their chores and the occasional visitor. Many commoners are at work when the Court meets, but that is not the whole explanation.

Nominations for this month’s election (if there is to be one) close on 12th November, with any withdrawals to be notified by 16th. We shall therefore know in a couple of weeks if there is to be a contest and if there is, voting will take place on 30th November. Indications at this stage are that both of the retiring Verderers are likely to stand for election again, while one or two others are “considering standing”.

The ins and outs of camp wardens

Another camping season in the Forest has closed, except for the year-round operations at Set Thorns. Following repeated complaints of alleged abuse, the rights of camp staff to be on the Forest outside the season were reiterated at the October Verderers’ Court. Wardens (including cleaners etc) may move their vans onto the Forest ten days before the opening of the season and must leave within ten days of its closing. This should remove uncertainty in future years. In addition, the controversial long-term letting of pitches on Forest sites is subject to a strict rule that vans and tents must be moved every twenty eight days. To me that seems quite long enough for any grass beneath them to be killed or seriously damaged, but it is better than no moving at all.

Ash dieback disease

The spectre of this disease threatens the New Forest as it does the countryside generally. Fortunately the numbers of ash trees on Crown land are small compared to say oak and beech. However, they are an important constituent of streamside woodland in places

and there are rare stands in the Inclosures such as those at Lower Sloden. At this time of year they are beloved of ponies who seek them out, even beyond their normal territories or runs, because the fallen leaves are so palatable – a process which the old commoners called “ashing”.

The real disaster will come if we lose ash trees from the surrounding villages where they are in some places the dominant tree. In my own village ash trees are among the most important landscape features, while the adjoining village of Woodfalls contains perhaps the finest and most ancient pollarded ash tree in the Forest area.

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