

New Forest Notes – November 1990

Land gold mines

The price of small parcels of agricultural kind ("pony paddocks" in estate agents' jargon) has long been a subject of intense interest in the Forest. The sum that old Smith extracted from his neighbour for two acres or the crazy price paid by Brown for a little patch up against the Forest is often a more absorbing topic of conversation than the latest village scandal. Of course one's attitude to the rocketing land values of recent years depends upon whether you are buying or selling. In the latter case the phenomenon is merely the expression of a healthy market in land.

This autumn has seen quite a flurry of land sales across the north of the Forest with the first signs of an easing in prices for some years. In one auction of three paddocks near Woodfalls, not one of the lots reached its reserve price, although all sold afterwards, probably for prices in the region of £7,000 per acre. At Woodgreen another auction, again of three paddocks with rather poor access, produced prices around £6,000 per acre and private sales seem to be at similar levels for land close to the Forest. It is perhaps unwise to draw firm conclusions from so small a sample and every plot has its own special characteristics which enhance or depress value, but it is not long ago that prices of £10,000 per acre were becoming common in the same area. If recent sales represent the beginning or a downturn in prices, it is not likely to be of much comfort to the average commoner to whom it makes little difference if the raw material of his trade sells for £15,000 or £5,000 per acre: either rate is quite beyond his reach.

Figures produced for the New Forest Review Group in 1987 showed the history of one field sold in Minstead, sold in 1968 for £350 per acre, resold in 1973 for £2,000 per acre and then (1987) worth in the region of £5,000 per acre. Agricultural quality now has little relevance to land values in the Forest. The proximity of wealthy neighbours who can be squeezed (preferably with daughters of pony keeping age and no land of their own) is probably the greatest single determinant of price. Some villages such as Burley suffer from their own special brand of land market madness with rumours of £15,000 or £20,000 per acre not uncommon. Such stories are always, in the absence of an auction, difficult to verify. Both vendors and purchasers are very coy about their dealings. Where information is leaked, the happy seller is not above exaggerating his good fortune, while the buyer may wish to play down his own folly. In one sale of which I know in the summer, a recreational pony keeper paid near £20,000 for a one-and-a-half acre plot, but admitted a price of only £15,000 to the neighbours!

Apart from the fascination of this market in small plots, it does present some very real and serious problems for the planners. One has only to look at the ramshackle series of tin sheds which now adorn former farmland near the National Trust's Cadnam Green, to see how a once beautiful area can be spoiled in a few short years. As the remaining large land holdings in the Forest break down, this is a problem which will grow. We all need buildings for our animals (I have quite as much corrugated iron as the next man), but the cumulative effect on the landscape is not pleasant.

Seedling firs

There is a school of thought in the Forest which maintains that nothing ever improves and that those who strive to protect this area will at best merely regulate the rate at which it degraded. History has a depressing way of confirming this hypothesis so it is pleasant to be able in record a notable exception to the rule. After years of resistance to those provisions of the New Forest Act 1949 which require the clearance of self-sown trees, the Forestry Commission is now making a genuine and determined effort to suppress the Scots pine invasion in the open Forest.

The Scots pine is, leaving aside erudite controversy about its presence or otherwise before the last ice age, an alien tree to the New Forest. It was introduced in about 1770 with the first planting outside private land almost certainly being close to Ogdens Purlieu, near Linwood. It has shown itself remarkably at home on our acid heaths and, without regular burning, would rapidly colonise the whole Forest. It was in fact Scots pine which allowed the major silvicultural expansion of 140 years ago which threatened to destroy the New Forest altogether.

Since 1949, the Commission has been under a qualified obligation to clear it from the open heaths and woods of the Forest, but for various reasons has chosen to pay little more than lip service to the requirements of the Act. In the meantime, the worst of the spread has been controlled by the annual burning programme. Now all this has changed with major clearance programmes being completed or in progress in various parts of the Forest. One of the most successful has been between Fordingbridge and Fritham where the landscape of 100 years ago has been largely restored by a thorough and effective clearance. At present work is going on between Bolderwood and Burley in such charmingly-named places as Soldier's Bog, Stinking Edge Wood and Mouse's Cupboard. Unfortunately, in parts of this area, the scheme has begun to go off the rails. In place of the thorough clearance of earlier projects, a scatter of uninspiring trees has been left to reinfest the area with seed. Large quantities of rubbish (branches and other useless timber) have been left lying about unburnt and there is unrepaired extraction damage. Of course it may be unfair to judge the scheme as a whole in its uncompleted state, but much of the earlier work is now well over a year old.

One of the problems seems to be that the committee of learned people which directs such operations is full of expertise on forestry, grazing and ecology, but rather less strong in its understanding of the subtle elements of the New Forest landscape which appeal to the man in the street. His interest in the Dartford Warbler or the economics of commoning may be very limited, but he knows instinctively how the Forest should look. The Victorians, especially in such areas as the Forest, had an understanding of landscape and an ability to express in words what we now find so hard to define. Auberon Herbert, who lived at Old House close to the present scene of operations, was one such famous exponent of the subject. He would have been dismayed at the present surroundings of his old home.

At least there can be little argument about the present unsatisfactory conditions prevailing in Soldier's Bog, both from the landscape and grazing points of view. I doubt if it is a particularly appealing wildlife

habitat either. Perhaps a clean-up and reassessment of the area should be carried out before fresh felling blocks are taken on.

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