

New Forest Notes – November 1994

THE SECRETIVE FOREST

This autumn the New Forest has entered one of its periodic phases of secrecy and rumour, following on the recent reverses of the New Forest Committee. Little cliques have been established, most notably under the auspices of two of the Forests leading legal gentlemen, to re-think the Forests constitution in the wake of the government's decision on the quasi-national park. Those attending the meeting are said to have included most of the Forests great names acting, as someone suggested, like vultures chewing over the carcass of the New Forest Committee's ambition. If this is an accurate assessment, then I think the great men have moved somewhat prematurely: the corpse continues to twitch.

During the regular monthly reports to the Verderers on the doings of the New Forest Committee, we were told that it is seeking clarification and improvement of the planning protection of the Forests suburban fringe. All attempts at seeking statutory status for the Committee, on the other hand, have been abandoned. Rumour, usually well informed in a leaky place like the New Forest, has a rather different perspective on the subject. Following a secret meeting of the Committee, it is said that the loss of a battle has been acknowledged, but that the determination to win the war remains undiminished in some sections of the Committee. If this story is to be believed, it seems that the Forest must prepare itself for a fresh onslaught if and when the government or the present Member of Parliament changes.

This sort of scheming behind closed doors used to irritate me considerably. It seemed remote from the practical day to day problems of Forest management with which those of us who do not number among the great and the good must contend. Indeed, it sometimes appeared specially designed to make our own task more difficult. However, plotting of this type is endemic to the New Forest, and so often comes to nothing that I have given up worrying too much about it. It evidently gives immense enjoyment to its participants and they not infrequently end up shooting themselves in the foot by infuriating those from whom the secrets are supposed to be kept. I shall content myself with the thrilling stock of confidential business transacted by the Verderers in committee as they consider blocked drains, telegraph poles, mischievous ponies and cattle ear tags.

Rumour has also been busy in the matter of the forthcoming Verderers election. It seems very probable that there will be a contest for the two places and the names of the candidates will be known by November the 10th. Then, and assuming that there is to be a contest, the New Forest Association and the Commoners Defence will jointly call a public meeting of candidates so that they may explain their views on Forest management and generally sell themselves to the electors. The meeting has to be fixed at very short notice, but will no doubt be advertised in the Press. Anyone interested should also be able to obtain details from the

officers of either association. My own experience of the sharp end of such meetings in the past is that they are generally polite and well ordered gatherings. The candidates seldom have greatly differing views and the meetings are more to assess the individuals than to discover their views. They are nonetheless among the more interesting of Forest meetings and are well worth attending.

There has been a great deal of speculation about the identity of likely candidates. Two Verderers are to retire and one of them, Len Mansbridge, has indicated that he will not stand again. This brings to an end a long chapter of valued service to the Court by one of the Forests elder statesmen. Over the years, Len has held important offices in the pony breeding society and the Commoners Defence Association.

The creation of, as it were a vacant space on the Court, immediately attracts the interest of candidates who might have hesitated to challenge two strong retiring Verderers offering themselves for re-election. I have heard mention the names of no less than six potential candidates, including one lady. Of these one tells me he definitely intends to stand, two are considering it and one has no intention of standing. I have made no enquiries of the remaining two and one of them I have never even met. Altogether it promises to be an interesting election.

Felling and Thinning

This time of year sees the annual outing organised by the Forestry Commission to view the felling and thinning proposals for the coming season. This event was instituted after the great conflicts of 1968 to 1970 when the Commission was endeavouring to eliminate hardwood from the Forests Inclosures. Thereafter, the attendees gradually declined as less and less hardwood cutting was undertaken - especially after the great storm of 1987. Over the last couple of years, however, the Commission has put a great deal of effort into these open air lectures and, on October 11th there was a near record attendance.

Verderers and Panel members were first of all shown Markway Inclosure where various conservation plans were explained. After Markway, conifer thinnings were examined and seemed generally uncontroversial. It was not until the broadleaved thinning came under the spotlight that serious concerns began to surface. The Commissions plans show vast blocks of Napoleonic and mid - 19th Century oak which are being "considered" for thinning. This, it seems, does not mean that they will be thinned, but that the Commission is looking at them to see if they can contribute to a target figure of 3,000 cubic metres of timber which their working plan prescribes should be extracted each year.

Many of us attending the meeting were unhappy that thinning should be determined by a pre-set target, rather than the ability of the woods to yield timber without damage to their character, but this was something of a side issue. The real problem is that the Commission is

seeking approval for work of unspecified extent throughout the most beautiful plantations of the Forest with all the inevitable disruption and extraction damage which will accompany it. They were in effect looking for a blank cheque and they did not get it. Perhaps the most important comment was that made for the for the New Forest Association - that the Commission should take as little as possible now, because in a few years it may well seem incredible that in the in the last decade of the 20th Century, the Forests old hardwood plantations were still being managed for commercial gain.

The course of future action in the hardwood plantations was left rather vague at the end of the meeting. It seems likely that a more precise identification of the areas to be thinned will now be carried out and a further conducted tour will be arranged. This, it is hoped, will include a visit to Pondhead at Lyndhurst where rather severe work was undertaken in 1971. There, a combination of regeneration felling and thinning was amid some of the worst extraction damage I have ever seen in the New Forest. Its success in silvicultural terms will be well worth assessing.

Animal Accidents

Problems in the New Forest come and go, but road accidents involving commonable animals are a depressing and unchanging feature of Forest life. A recent appalling increase in numbers may be no more than a statistical anomaly, but it has again raised questions as to the achievement of the 40 m.p.h. speed limit, or at least demonstrated that it is only as good as the degree to which it is enforced. However unpalatable it may be, there is simply no solution to Forest road accidents apart from the physical separation of the killers and their victims. On the A31 in 1963 89 were killed and injured. Two years later it was fenced and none died. Today, on the Fordingbridge road (closely followed by the Dibden Purlieu to Portmore road), killing levels are approaching those of the 1960s and 1970s on the then unfenced A35 and A37.

We can, of course, continue to bury our heads in the sand and resist for all time the fencing of these two main slaughterhouses. Alternatively, we can adopt radical solutions and eliminate all but a handful of animal accidents each year. If these two main roads were to be fenced, the killing rate would drop by over 30%. Almost all Forest residents would then live within six minutes of a fast fenced road, even if their speeds during those minutes were limited to 20 m.p.h. The few seconds they would lose by observing such a limit would be more than made up on the fenced racetracks, while in the unfenced lanes of the livestock zone, the limit could be enforced with effective measures such as sleeping policemen which are unacceptable in the 40 m.p.h. limit.

But of course it will not be done. Fencing is disliked even by many commoners; it interferes materially with hunting; it is alleged to be unsightly and to spoil the Forest. So we will continue to spoil ponies instead and to waste time on pointless measures like rumble strips which have

not the slightest chance of success. The latest brilliant idea, has been heralded as a great event with much press and television excitement. The fact that collars were exhaustively tested in 1960, together with all sorts of dyes and ear tags, seems quite irrelevant. They failed then and they will fail now.

I suppose the most disgusting part of the whole business of Forest animal slaughter is the large and growing number of unreported accidents. In other words 50% of motorists are happy to leave their victims dying in agony without informing anyone who could relieve their suffering with a bullet. I suspect that many others would like to do the same, but the wrecked state of their vehicles makes escape impossible. No doubt many have enough alcohol in their blood to make any encounter with the police unwelcome, but this would surly not prevent them from making an anonymous phone call.