

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2012

The drift season and livestock numbers

When, on the 19th September, the Verderers met for the first time after the summer break, there was the usual catching-up with two months of accumulated business, although the open session of the court was unusually quiet, with only one presentment and that simply the Deputy Surveyor's annual statement on pannage. This absence of excitement was disappointing for a party of visitors from Epping Forest, and it contrasted with a very busy period on the ground, with the drift or round-up season at its height. The head agister's report on the drifts so far was particularly interesting. Some drifts have been very successful with 200 or more ponies caught in a single day, but on other occasions only a dozen or so have been trapped. The general opinion is that because the ponies are, by and large, in excellent condition at the moment and because the number of foals has been reduced by less stallions being turned out, the mares are beginning to get the edge over their pursuers – especially in difficult wooded country where there are few fences to channel stock to the pounds. Pursuing horses are at a disadvantage over such ground, carrying a rider and challenged by fit mares who don't have to worry about an accompanying foal. Still, one can hardly complain about this. The contrast with twenty years ago when a significant proportion of the mares was often in poor condition and incapable of speed and endurance, is a welcome one.

What is more disturbing is the inexorable rise in the number of animals on the Forest, despite the decrease in the breeding rate of the ponies. The Clerk told the Verderers that there are now 8174 ponies, cattle and donkeys paid for as opposed to 7110 at the same time last year. By any measure this is a worrying increase. In part it reflects the improved subsidy arrangements, with more commoners than before being able to take advantage of the payments and with some perhaps encouraged to increase numbers, but there are other factors at work as well. Cattle numbers are greatly increased, reflecting in part the buoyant state of the market for beef animals. This market is in great contrast to that for ponies, where the dreadful prices may be encouraging owners to retain animals which would otherwise be sold. Welfare payments are accordingly being introduced to encourage the permanent removal of old ponies which are less able to withstand difficult winter conditions. Altogether, the Forest is at the mercy of economic trends which it is powerless to control. The Verderers' only effective weapons are in the manipulation of subsidy levels and the rates of marking fees.

Disruptive noise in the Forest

I have always regarded the amount of noise in the Forest, mostly from traffic, as being its most disagreeable feature. In recent times any attempt to reduce it by screening or earth bunding has been blocked by conservation interests. It was not always so in the past. The finest example of such work was instituted by the Forestry Commission near Foxhill Pond, just south of the A 31, where a really effective visual and sound barrier was made along more than half a kilometre of the road, using surplus soil from improvements to the carriageway. I cannot see that there have been any adverse effects on wildlife, but I am sure someone will know of an obscure lichen that has been affected.

Whatever the problems of reducing road noise, there is one source of disturbance which could be switched off at a stroke, and that comes from the railway. Anyone who walks in the Forest south of Ashurst Lodge, in what is otherwise a very quiet area remote from main roads, cannot fail to notice the continual scream of train whistles which echoes for miles across the heath. This arises from the presence of an almost forgotten level crossing of the railway which leads from an overgrown part of Deerleap Inclosure to the heath below Matley. There was once a little cottage here which I remember being burnt down in the 1960s. It appears that as trains approach from either direction, the drivers are obliged to give a long blast on their sirens and as there are many trains on this main line, the racket is continuous. I did once use that crossing as an experiment and it was an un-nerving experience. I think that trains here are travelling at about 100 miles per hour and one had the feeling that a twisted ankle and bad fall on the line would result in certain death – siren blasts not withstanding. In August, at the peak of the holiday season, I spent two days working at one side of the crossing and saw not a single person use it. That is hardly surprising as there is a safe bridge over the railway only a short distance to the south east, on the main footpath from Longdown to Matley. There walkers can cross in complete safety, even if their enjoyment of the Forest is marred by the hideous graffiti-fouled corrugated iron replacement parapets. So much for good design within the national park !

If the crossing could be closed, the quiet of the Forest would be restored and the risks to rail users and the very occasional pedestrian would be eliminated.

A similar problem exists at Woodfidley where there is another terrifying pedestrian access to the line necessitating the constant use of sirens. Again there is a bridge a little to the north. I walk a good deal in the area and I have sometimes used this crossing, but the balance of advantage to the Forest in its closure would be overwhelming, even given minor inconvenience to occasional users.

The Roundhill water tower

A couple of years ago the West Hampshire Water Company removed the hideous water tower which disfigured the top of Long Beech. The tower had been built to serve Stoney Cross Aerodrome long before there was a mains supply to the adjoining village of Fritham. Nobody, I think, mourned its disappearance.

There is a similar tower at Roundhill camp site near the corner of Stockley Inclosure. It dates from the same period and was presumably to serve Beaulieu Aerodrome. Now it appears the tank is worn out and Sembcorp has applied to replace it with a structure of the same sort. The Verderers considered the application in September and did not like it. Recent reservoirs on the Open Forest have been concrete tanks carefully covered in earth mounds which are quickly obscured by natural vegetation. The reservoir at Nomansland is an excellent example. A casual passer-by would not even notice its existence, despite its large size. The Verderers felt that if new storage facilities are essential (presumably to serve the campers and perhaps some adjoining properties), they should be of the same form as the Nomansland and Sway reservoirs, even if that necessitates some pumping. The Roundhill tower is made even more offensive by the galvanized iron fence which surrounds it to stop campers climbing the structure and to deter potential suicides who might throw themselves off the top..

A Bramshaw discovery

I expect some discerning visitors to the New Forest are disappointed to find that we have no great fortifications such as Maiden Castle, Badbury Rings or even the fine fort at Buckland Rings. The best the Forest can offer is little defensive hilltop enclosures such as at Castle Hill west of Burley, Castle Malwood at Minstead and Castle Hill at Woodgreen. In all these cases the original interior of the enclosures has been destroyed or badly damaged. The first two are thought to be prehistoric, while a possible Norman date has been suggested for part of the Woodgreen site.

Perhaps the New Forest was always too poor an area to justify the creation of expensive defensive earthworks. Invading forces may simply have swept across it in pursuit of more fertile areas beyond, or it may have been bypassed altogether. In recent years, however, several small semi-defensive enclosures have been located, perhaps constructed to protect an individual family or village group, together with their livestock, against unwelcome attention from hostile neighbours or criminal gangs. Such settlements have ramparts far larger than would be necessary for agricultural or domestic purposes, but insufficient to repel an organized military attack. The most recent example to come to light is in dense woodland near Bramshaw and has an area of about one and a half acres. It is surrounded by earthworks which even today are over six feet high in places and which may once have been double that size. Its builders cleverly incorporated some natural erosion terraces in the layout and that probably accounts for its not having been recognized until now, despite an almost certain prehistoric origin.

Somerley Estate Catalogue

In July I wrote about the problems which had arisen over the sale of part of Ibsley Common and the fear that purchasers might be unaware of the existence of common rights over the land. That danger has now, I hope, been averted. The agents have made clear to potential buyers exactly what their responsibilities are as owners of common land, although I do not know if all or any of the lots has now been sold. As part of the Verderers' investigation of the history of this land, I asked if anyone owning a copy of the Somerley Estate catalogue from 1919 would allow the Court to make copies. There was only one response, but that was an exceptionally generous one comprising the gift of an original catalogue to the Court.

The document is an amazing one comprising about 70 pages dealing with 122 lots. It contains two coloured maps and the lots include the soil of Ibsley, Rockford and Gorley Commons, together with farms, cottages and larger houses throughout the Avon Valley villages from Gorley to Blashford. In all the estate sold off (or at least tried to sell) 7,560 acres on the edge of the Forest and on the far side of the Avon. That was in the fateful year of 1919 as great properties across the country were crumbling and as it now appears we are threatened with at Downton Abbey. So large was the sale that it was scheduled to take place over three afternoons. Preparation of the catalogue must have been a nightmare for the compositors concerned as I have never seen such a jumble of different fonts and type sizes. The archaic and pompous language of the estate agents is a delight. When they ran out of more mundane adjectives, they resorted (for example) to describing a "perfect building site", or a "capital smallholding". In those days, of course, there was no planning and any suitable paddock was offered as a building site.

Either the original of this invaluable local history source, or a copy on CD will now be deposited in the Christopher Tower Library for public use.

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