

NEW FOREST NOTES OCTOBER 2017

Public behaviour in the Park

It was inevitable that once national park status was imposed on the New Forest the pressures on this area would steadily increase. The immense growth in recreational demands and the rise in property prices (the Forest is now said to be the most expensive park to live in) were both widely predicted, but perhaps the deterioration in public behaviour was not quite so universally expected. It has always been a mystery to me why several of our otherwise sensible amenity groups were not far-sighted enough to anticipate the more obvious dangers and the consequent deterioration of the Forest's quality. It is not as though they were not given enough warning of what would happen. They simply climbed meekly aboard a movement which has since been careering towards destruction of so much that was formerly valued in the New Forest. They, I suppose, assumed that national parks, like the National Health Service or the National Gallery must be a "good thing" – and they were terribly wrong. All of that was ten years ago. Now, with so many of the pressures at or beyond breaking point there was a spectacular eruption of revulsion in the September Verderers' Court meeting, with residents and commoners complaining about the appalling behaviour of so many visitors over the summer months.

I think it is incumbent on members of the Court to listen impartially and impassively to the presentments made by members of the public, but there are occasions when it is very difficult not to betray some feeling about what is being said. The last court was certainly one of those times. The principal presentment was from Mr. Thew of Burley, who lives in a remote former woodman's cottage in one of the Inclosures. After explaining to the Verderers how he had personally suffered from a range of appalling behaviours by the public over the summer, he went on to point out that the National Park is failing the Forest by ignoring the "Sandford Principle". That is a regulation which requires the authority to put the welfare of the Forest before the demands of recreation where the two are in conflict. It is a rule the authority has consistently ignored since the Park was established over ten years ago, trying all the time to increase the number of visitors and the range of activities they are encouraged to undertake here. Similarly, he said that the Forestry Commission is deliberately avoiding enforcement of its byelaws, leading towards the ruination of the New Forest. Examples he gave include the failure to act against illegal campers and off-road cyclists – people "who are hell bent on destroying that which we all love and cherish". His presentment was met with applause from members of the public and I think that I was not the only verderer to have had difficulty in not joining in. It was such a clear reflection of the frustration we have all felt in witnessing the abuse of the Forest by visitors, almost on a daily basis. It is a frustration worsened by the extreme reluctance of the Forestry Commission to clamp down on offenders and by the constant probing by the Park Authority to find more ways of intensifying use of the Forest. Of course there are many thoughtful and respectful users who do behave themselves, who leave no litter, damage nothing, refrain from cycle and other trespass, do not let their dogs run wild, and cause no disturbance to local people. For the moment they may even be in a majority, but the lawless and inconsiderate element grows every year

under the standard national park user's philosophy that because it is "national" it belongs to them and because it is a park they can do as they please in it.

Mr. Thew was supported in his complaints by former head agister, Brian Ingrem and by Mrs. Alison Bolton, both of whom are well known authorities on Forest matters and it was clear that their views were also those of the overwhelming majority of the public attending the open court.

Where do we go from here? It would be good to think that the Park will have a change of heart, abandoning its uncritical and continuous attempts to intensify pressures on the Forest. Of course these attempts are dressed up in all sorts of "green" disguises. They are sold as encouraging healthy exercise, providing opportunities for the disadvantaged and minority groups, educating young people, promoting green transport, supporting sustainable business and so on. Each of these might be good in isolation and in another context, but all of them merely ratchet up the pressure by bringing more and more people to the Forest. Once they are here, the indolence of the Forestry Commission, simply allows them to behave in a thoroughly uncivilized manner. If the complaints by Mr. Thew and his colleagues are to achieve anything they will need to produce a complete reversal of present official policies in both Lymington Town Hall and Queen's House. They will also need clear and open commitment by the Forest societies, as well as the authorities, to give up weasel words such as "we are in danger of damaging the Forest" and to admit that the damage has already been done and that we have all, so far, failed to accept this unpalatable truth. It will be much easier simply to push matters back under the carpet and continue as we have been going. Mr. Thew asked the Verderers what we would tell our grandchildren when they enquired why we did nothing to save the Forest before it was too late. I fear that the answer will be that it was because action was simply too politically difficult after the national park genie had been let out of the bottle.

Trees

This autumn looks like being a peculiar one for forest trees. To start with the acorn crop is very heavy indeed, especially in some parts of the Forest. Moreover, the individual acorns are unusually large with some about the size of small conkers. They sound like gunfire when falling on a corrugated iron roof or on top of one's car. It is difficult to understand why some trees are loaded with mast, while an adjoining oak may be altogether devoid of acorns. I understand that the number of pigs so far turned out is not unusually large, but in any case their activities are never more than a marginal help in clearing up the crop. Still, the abundance of acorns, is likely to lead to an extension of the pannage season beyond its statutory period. Meanwhile the ponies and cattle are shovelling them up in many places as fast as they fall. It is too early to estimate the likely total of deaths from acorn poisoning, but there are fears that the numbers could be large. Riding ponies confined in small fields with oak trees are particularly vulnerable and can quickly become acorn addicts.

More worrying than the recurring problem of the acorn crop is the first signs of death among ash trees. I don't know if this has anything to do with ash dieback disease (Chalara) or is quite separate from it. The Forestry Commission's website has a useful map showing the spread of

confirmed cases of the disease, more or less forming a circle around the Forest, but then the number of ash trees within the crown lands is small compared to oak. It does show a recently infected area north of Salisbury and earlier infections west of the Avon.

About the middle of August a huge ash tree on my farm started to show thinning and yellowing of its leaves and by the middle of September every leaf had gone so that it is now a bare skeleton. It is surrounded on all sides by other ash trees which seem to be perfectly healthy and I can only hope that this is not the beginning of the end for ash, as happened with the elms in the 1960s. On the Forest land itself, I have seen similar symptoms in a tree outside Fritham House.

Courtroom improvements

It is now a year since the restoration of the Verderers' courtroom was undertaken and little improvements continue to be made. In my October Notes of 2016 I regretted the absence of any permanent record incorporated in the new works to show the date on which they were undertaken. Previous Queen's House renovation schemes carried the initials of the reigning sovereign and the date of the works, usually on rainwater hoppers or similar locations. At the September court the Deputy Surveyor announced that the inscription "ER 2016" was about to be carved into the stonework of the re-built west bay of the courtroom, so the contribution of this generation to the survival of the old building will now be appropriately noted.

The September court also saw the arrival of a new (antique) table for the use of reporters. This replaces a hideous modern piece of furniture which had disfigured the courtroom for some years. The new arrival is of chestnut and was purchased by the Forestry Commission at a local auction. It may not be as old as the court's other fittings, but it seems to me to fit in very well.

Explosives

The attitude of public authorities to explosives littered about the New Forest has varied over the years from cavalier disregard to extreme sensitivity. In 1998 the Forestry Commission sent rotavators into the part of the Ashley Walk range which had been used for testing anti-personnel devices, to tear up the ground as part of a gorse regeneration experiment. That seemed to me to be a very foolhardy action. In more recent times the WW1 trench mortar range at Longwater has been demarcated by ranging poles and sign boards forbidding the public to enter while the army searched for (and presumably removed) unexploded bombs. That was in an area where neither man nor beast had received any injury in the century since the range closed. Most of the poles and notices have now been removed, so I assume that the operation is completed.

The pendulum has now swung so far to the opposite extreme from the Ashley Walk case that a plan to replace electricity poles on the Forest north east of Ipley Manor is being subjected to an unprecedented level of caution. In the short length between Ipley and Marchwood Inclosure the electricity company has identified one hundred and sixty three "potential (metal) targets" which could be unexploded ordnance at depths of up to 1.3m and in weight up to 26kg. Trial excavations are to

take place on thirty three sites to check the nature of the material discovered. If they are found not to be bombs and shells, the area will be declared safe and the work can go ahead.

I know that several years ago the Forestry Commission made a big show of clearing areas near Latchmore Brook of bombs. Colourful pictures of the results appeared online, but one can still find bombs or parts of them projecting from the ground throughout that area. No doubt they are reasonably safe so long as they are not interfered with and perhaps we are over-sensitive about such things in the Forest. I believe French and Belgian farmers simply stack bombs (revealed on ploughing) beside the roads for the army to collect from time to time.

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