

New Forest Notes – October 1990

Animal accidents

New Forest farming has suffered two unpleasant setbacks in the last few weeks; both of them related to animal accidents. Firstly there was the unwelcome news that the early promise of the speed limit in the north of the Forest has not been maintained. Accidents in the speed limit area (north of the A31) during July and August exceeded those for the corresponding periods in previous years when no limit applied. Those who foretold that accident figures would quickly recover their old levels after an initial improvement will take no pleasure in seeing the prophecy fulfilled. It is not the speed limit itself that is at fault. The encouraging reduction in the early months proved what the Commoners have long believed — that it is speed which is responsible for the majority of accidents. While the limit was new and police cars were still in evidence on the Fordingbridge road, many fewer animals were killed. Now only the Sunday afternoon drivers stick religiously to the limit. The commuters have reassessed the prospects of getting caught and determined that they are small. Driving at 40 m.p.h. from Godshill to Cadnam at 8.30 a.m. today and an increasing number of cars will sweep past whereas in April, a sedate procession would move across the Forest. Things are even worse after dark. It is also becoming increasingly common to be passed by speeding vehicles displaying the County Council's stickers exhorting observance of the limit. One such car, probably doing in excess of 60 m.p.h., overtook me at Stoney Cross on the very day that the depressing figures were announced.

The second blow heaps further financial loss on the unfortunate commoner who loses a pony or cow in a road accident. In the past, the carcass has been collected by a knacker who made a small payment to the owner. Now, with new regulations on the disposal of offal, a charge in the region of £25 is likely to be made. Worse could still be to come as obscure E.E.C. rules now under consideration could force out of business all but the largest and best equipped knackers. If this happens, burial might be the only option and the cost of this, including transport to the holding, is not likely to be less than £50.

The Pannage Season

The 1990 pannage season has just started and will run until the end of next month. Pannage, or the right of common of mast, entitles New Forest Commoners to turn out pigs to eat acorns and beech mast during the autumn. At one time the right was of great economic importance to the small cottagers and farmers in the Forest, but today it is exercised by a dwindling number of people who are still prepared to put up with the irritations and expenses involved. Like pony and cattle keeping, no-one becomes rich turning out pigs in the New Forest.

One of the chief problems facing Forest pig keepers is the change in the nature of the Forest's resident population. In the old days everyone knew that they had to maintain their fence in good order or accept the ravages of Forest pigs without complaint. Pigs tend to be confined to particular areas of the Forest where oak trees abound and those who lived in such villages, were country people who

accepted pigs in the same spirit as they accepted rain or the occasional head cold — annoying, but part of life. Today things are very different. Retired or business people fresh from the garden suburb of the Midlands or South East have little understanding of what constitutes stock proof fencing and even less of their obligations and rights as new members of the Forest community. Wrecked gardens and pigs escaping onto roads outside the Forest are the rule. At various times the pig owners, Verderers and police have appealed for the co-operation of landowners, especially in vicinity of the A38 at Wellow, but with only limited success. In this part of the Forest it is feared that there may be a serious accident through pigs escaping through useless fencing onto road where motorists would not expect to find animals,

On the other side of the coin, it must be admitted that the New Forest commoner is not always blameless in the continuing pig wars of recent years. Too often the Forest is plagued with pigs which are not properly ringed or paid for, in open defiance of the Verderers' byelaws. It is not unusual to find these animals ranging widely across the Forest outside normal pig districts and causing considerable damage. My own village of Hale, where pigs have not been turned out for fifty years or so, suffered from one such group of vagrants last year. They destroyed innumerable gardens before eventually being impounded by the Verderers.

Local Meetings

The New Forest societies are always looking for new ways of boosting their membership and it is surprising how few people out of Hampshire's vast population seem willing to contribute a few pounds annually to the protection of the Forest. Over the years attractions have ranged from auction sales to dances but the New Forest Commoners' Defence Association provides one service to its members which upstages all its rivals. Each autumn since the last War, it has held a series of local meetings in all parts of the Forest. This enables members to raise such specifically local issues as a broken bridge or the need for scrub clearance beside a road, which they might be reluctant to do in a general meeting of the association. The local meetings also give an opportunity for the committee to report in detail on its work and most meetings are held in the informal atmosphere of a local pub. For many years the meeting at the Rising Sun at Wootton was the most popular, often commanding an attendance of more than sixty members, but this has now declined in favour of the East Boldre meeting. Bramshaw has always been popular with the Myrtle Hall at Burley usually having the smallest attendance.

Despite its slightly belligerent and factional title, the Commoners' Defence Association membership is by no means confined to active commoners. Anyone interested in the Forest is welcome as a full or associate member depending upon whether or not they have Forest rights attached to their property. For those who are new to the Forest, the local meetings give a fascinating glimpse of a very specialized farming community, which it would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

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