

New Forest Notes - October 1991

Legacy of the Storm

This month sees the fifth anniversary of the great storm which caused widespread damage to the unenclosed woods of the New Forest on October 16th. 1987. Four years one might have supposed, would have been more than enough time for the Forestry Commission to institute a comprehensive programme of clearance, fencing and replanting in these woods, so what has gone wrong? Why, apart from the clearance of tops dangerous to animals and the opening of tracks, does the statutorily-named "Ancient and Ornamental Woodland" (A&O for short) remain today virtually as the storm left it?

This was the question which was answered recently in Gritnam Wood near Lyndhurst when a committee of Forestry Commission experts and local consultees met a member of the local residents' association. He viewed with dismay the destruction around him and felt that the Commission should take urgent action to restore a beautiful and "dying" wood. His concern and his arguments will seem so entirely reasonable and are probably so widely shared that their unanimous rejection by the assembled experts seems perverse and in need of an explanation.

The first thing that must be said of the A&O is that it is of immense historical and ecological importance, apart from being one of the most beautiful elements of the Forest. Past attempts at management directed principally at promoting regeneration (the growth of new trees) have at best resulted in a very artificial effect and at worst have seriously damaged the woods. There is now a general acceptance that, except in exceptional circumstances, nature is by far the best manager of these woods.

But if the woods are dying, surely they should be replanted and fenced in to protect the young trees? In fact, contrary to popular belief, the A&O woods as a whole are not dying. In total they have expanded in area over the last century although the extent of that expansion is a matter of discussion. We grieve over areas where huge trees have fallen in profusion, but we overlook vigorous young saplings elsewhere protected by brambles and fallen branches. Certainly there are some woods which are disappearing, but other new woods are developing elsewhere in the Forest so that the loss of one is balanced by the establishment of another. The A&O is in a constant state of ebb and flow within limitations imposed by soil and fluctuating grazing pressure, but this is a process which is measured in centuries, not observed in one human lifetime.

The whole business is complicated by the fact that we are concerned not only with questions of area — one wood developing and another decaying — but with time. An apparently dying wood may start to regenerate fifty years from now when grazing pressure declines or the canopy opens. Another wood may eventually comprise a few trees which established themselves fifty years ago, a few more,

which are now seedlings in the protection of 1987's fallen giants and others which will not be acorns for another hundred years. In understanding the A&O, we must look back, forward and sideways and the number of variables is huge.

At Gritnam there are certainly scenes of destruction (it is estimated that throughout the Forest, twenty years worth of windfalls occurred in one day), but there are also areas of strong young growth. Glades are forming here and there and on the woodland margins expansion is taking place. Throughout most of the area there is ample evidence of regeneration of a variety of different periods, quite sufficient to ensure the future survival of the wood as a whole. Man should leave it well alone and the Commission's response to the storm has shown an enlightenment which was sadly lacking in some earlier managements this century.

A fifth Agister for the Forest

The Verderers are advertising for a fifth agister. The appointment will take the number of the Court's staff to a record level and is being made in the face of growing pressure for a higher standard of animal husbandry, especially during the early months of the year. At that time the agisters are exceptionally busy collecting marking fees, carrying out inspections for an English Nature subsidy scheme for ponies and cattle and ensuring the removal of sub-standard stock. The desirability of having additional staff is probably not open to question. The Verderers, Commoners Defence and everyone else involved in the management of the Forest are fully aware of the damage to the commoners' reputation which the presence of poor stock can cause. The general application of such a reputation is, of course, very unfair as the vast majority of commoners work hard to ensure that the ponies and cattle are in good condition and well looked after.

The advertisement will probably attract the usual response from a few who see themselves in the role of John Wayne, spending endless days driving ponies and cattle about the Forest at a gallop. Such candidates are unlikely to impress the Verderers who will be looking for a conscientious and probably local person with a good knowledge of the Forest and its complicated ways. However, the job is not without its attractions and its glamorous element. A healthy outdoor life in beautiful surroundings with no boss breathing down one's neck is a rare commodity. But there is another, darker side to an agister's work. He must turn out at all hours of the day or night to deal with sick or injured animals, he must be stamped on and kicked in pounds full of slock, he must deal with the occasional difficult commoner and he must soothe the often ruffled feelings of members of the public. Shooting a foal with a broken leg in a muddy ditch at midnight is scarcely compensated for by the odd T.V. appearance or wearing a smart green uniform in the Verderers' Court.

Students of the Verderers' precarious finances may be concerned to know how the new appointment is to be paid for. An agister costs the Court on average £14,000 per annum. With the Court's reserves at December 31st, 1990. standing at £30,100 (including a surplus of £7,000 for that year after some years of deficit) the question is a pertinent one. With my no doubt outdated and stuffy notions of not buying goods and services unless their future finance is assured and of the need for more than

average caution in the administration of public funds, such an appointment at the present time is disturbing. However, management of the Verderers' finances this century has seen a long tradition of Micawberism, so this is nothing new. At least any fears of swingeing increases in the commoners' marking fees are premature pending the exhaustion of the remaining meagre reserves. In the meantime I have no doubt that the optimists will be proved right and an unwilling government will, as in the past, find some way of bailing out an impoverished Court.

Open Government?

At last month's Court, the Verderers were confronted by the now familiar figure of Mr. Bob Cooper from Minstead who, following in a long and honourable tradition, has taken on the role of inquisitor of the Court and examiner of its doings. One request which he renewed in September was that the Court should meet in public, rather than considering the major part of its business in committee. Now I have no very strong views one way or the other on this subject, although I suspect that open meetings would not achieve very much beyond boring the public with endless trivial detail which comprises so much of the Verderers' work. No doubt the Court would reserve the right to go into secret session to discuss anything really controversial (and therefore interesting) in much the same way as does a local authority.

However, there is one respect in which I do strongly agree with the thinking behind Mr. Cooper's presentment — there is far too much secrecy within the effective government of the Forest. There is a great fuss made about the democratic credentials of the Consultative Panel, the Open Verderers' Court and the occasional show appearance of the New Forest Committee, but as everyone in the Forest knows perfectly well, many key decisions are taken in cosy little meetings of a few individuals. When such decisions are bad, as they not infrequently are, it can take a massive effort of grass roots opinion to have the set aside. I am under no illusion that I, Mr. Cooper, or anyone else will be able to alter a system which is probably as old as the Forest itself, but it is frustrating to see much good work blocked or undermined by such back room activity.

Unfortunately the latest contender for power, the New Forest Committee, is perpetuating a bad tradition by the secrecy with which it operates. I exclude, of course, the largely bland fodder it provides for the consumption of the Consultative Panel. While such secrecy matters little at present, it will become a serious matter if the Committee, succeeds in its ambition of being a quasi-national park authority.

Winter Feed

Back in the early part of the summer when one week of rain succeeded another and cut hay blackened in the fields, it seemed that we might be faced with an unprecedented shortage of winter fodder. As things turned out, quite a lot of reasonable hay was made in August and the crisis was averted, but it did set me thinking about alternatives in the event of a total failure of the hay crop.

The Forest produces a highly nutritious feed in the form of gorse (furze or fuzz as the commoners call it). This was at one time widely harvested in the winter months and crushed before feeding to stock. I can remember turning the handle of my father's chaff cutter in an experiment along those lines in the 1960s. The process of cutting and crushing gorse is a slow and uncomfortable one by traditional methods, but an adaption of modern farm machinery to solve the problem ought not to be impossible. This would have the dual advantage of providing much-needed feed and of rejuvenating the gorse, which, when neglected or not regularly burnt, becomes leggy and of little value to the Forest animals for feed or shelter.

Of course the ponies running on the Forest have their own methods of dealing with gorse as it comprises one of their principal winter foods. It is carefully picked with the front teeth, lips curled back, and then carefully manipulated in the mouth before crushing and swallowing. The ability to do this seems instinctive in Forest ponies and not, as is sometimes claimed, learned from mother. My own riding ponies which were not born on the Forest are well aware of the technique. However, another method of dealing with the low gorse (cat fuzz). Is to pound it with the fore feet before eating and it is possible that this is learned from example. There is, I think, general agreement that this behaviour is far less common than it was some years ago and it is now quite rare to see an old mare preparing a meal in this way.

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