

New Forest Notes - October 1993

The Herbivores' Revenge

There seems to be no end to the stories of nuisance and tragedy caused by uncontrolled dogs in the New Forest. Ponies, cattle and sheep continue to be mutilated on a regular basis despite empty threats of action by the authorities. However, there are rare cases in which the victim (sheep excluded) is prepared to fight back or even launch pre-emptive strikes against what it perceives as, a potential attacker, even if in our eyes the dog presents no threat. Research in the 1960s showed that Forest mares would defend their foals against dog attacks and cows will sometimes protect their calves. Forest cows, on the other hand, have the uncomfortable habit of "parking" their offspring and going off to feed for hours. The abandoned calves are sometimes reported as lost by worried trippers. They are in fact perfectly happy, although extremely vulnerable to attack at such times. Occasionally whole nurseries of calves may be found sleeping in the Forest, sometimes under the watchful eye of a single adult.

Individual, defence against attack is sometimes complemented by herd action. In a recent and rare. tragedy outside the Forest, a lady walking her dog through a field of cows was overcome when the herd took collective measures to defend itself against what it took as a threat. In ponies, New Forest stallions commonly take up the rear when the herd is moving, presumably an instinctive defensive position to guard against predators of which the dog is the Forest's modern successor.

Attacks are not by any means confined to the Open Forest. My own riding ponies are kept in a field crossed by a public footpath where they are regularly harried by unleashed dogs. They ignore dogs on leads. One windy afternoon (horses are excited by wind) they had clearly had enough and turned on their tormentor driving it from the field and coming close to crushing it. Eight shod hooves and three quarters of a ton of angry New Forest pony is a good match for most dogs.

For riders in the New Forest, it is not just horse welfare that is at issue. There can be few who have not experienced uncontrolled dogs barking and snarling at their horse's heels, while the dog owner looks on with amusement or desperation as his / her little treasure ignores all commands to desist. For a competent adult this may not be a serious problem, but to a child or nervous rider it is often a really threatening situation. I long ago found it pointless shouting at dog owners to control their beasts; many either will not or cannot do so. I have therefore adopted a policy of turning the pony to face my assailant and then riding at it as hard as possible, there being no other reasonable means of preventing the attack. Bonzo's owner may act as though his pet has a divine right to chase anything in the Forest on four legs, but he is horrified when a horse and rider have the cheek to defend themselves. I should add, before I receive a visit from the R.S.P.C.A., that I have never yet got anywhere near making contact with the fleeing dog. I hope, however, that some salutary frights have been inflicted on both canine and human offenders.

Ponies and picnic parties

The relationship of New Forest ponies to the visiting public has been the subject, of concern in quite a different sense this summer. Although there has always been a problem with visitors feeding, petting and generally interfering with the ponies it seems to have reached new heights in the holiday season which is just ending. Despite all the Forestry Commission's efforts at education, many visitors seem incapable of understanding that the ponies are wild animals and should be treated as such.

Approaching them especially with helpful offers of food is foolish, detrimental to the animal welfare and even downright dangerous to those who do it. Close to an unfenced highway in the Forest it is also an offence to feed the livestock.

Left to itself the Forest pony's natural inclination is to ignore human beings or to avoid them. In the remoter parts of the Forest where the corrupting influence of the tripper does not extend, this is still the attitude of most ponies. In certain camp sites and car parks, however, food has been offered on such a regular basis that the ponies which run there have come, to regard it as part of the natural provision of the territories. It is normal equine behaviour for a pecking order to be established in a herd and feeding times this may be demonstrated by kicking and biting to ensure that the rations are secured. Broken horses are educated to know that such natural responses displayed to their human masters are unacceptable and if indulged in, will be met with unpleasant consequences. The wild New Forest pony is troubled by no such inhibitions. She has been taught by ill-advised trippers that the picnic party is just part of the natural food resources and she will use such force as is necessary to obtain the best share of it from other animal or human competitors. Such action is entirely natural and predictable. The animal is in no way at fault but the consequences in terms of human injury can be serious.

What is the solution to this growing problem? Clearly education has and will largely fail. It will never reach many of those most at risk who never buy a guidebook, read a notice or visit an information office. Fortunately the problem is largely confined to certain honey pot sites such as Cadnam Cricket Pitch. Here the solution is straightforward -- close the existing Open Forest recreation site and re-locate it in the adjoining Shave Green Inclosure from which the ponies are excluded by fences. Other sites such as the river recreation area at Balmer Lawn are slightly less easy to deal with. Clearly the Commoners will not accept loss to their grazing land to solve a recreational problem which is in no way their making and for which they rightly deny any responsibility. If enclosure of such picnic sites is the only solution, the provision of generous alternative grazing to be added to the Forest in the same area is likely to be the minimum terms which would induce the Commoners to agree. Such compensation is perfectly possible because of the large banks of "Crown Freehold" land held by the Forestry Commission in most parts of the Forest. In the absence of such exchange, outright closure of the offending sites seems the only answer, whatever the public outcry. The choice between these alternatives lies squarely on the shoulders of the Commission. They invite visitors to the sites and must accept responsibility for such injuries as they may reasonably expect their patrons to receive there.

Mystery of the lost Lodge

Over six hundred years ago (in 1358), Edward III issued orders for the construction of four lodges in the New Forest. By a combination of historical detective work and field research, one of these sites was identified in 1968 and other lodges of the same class and sometimes later date were subsequently discovered. In all, seven or eight royal hunting lodge sites are now known. But for twenty five years the mystery of one lodge -- Hatheburgh -- has defied the best efforts of historians and field archaeologists to identify it. The name appears in a number of mediaeval documents and then vanishes from the records.

Hatheburgh was no ordinary lodge. It possessed a great gate, a chamber for the king, a chapel and a long house including kitchen, larder, granary and stable. It was of timber framed and plaster construction, roofed with Purbeck and Cornish slate. The Forest seemed to have swallowed it without trace and for a quarter of a century it remained an unscratchable itch afflicting New Forest historians. Now all that is over thanks to the work of local historian Peter Roberts, who has published his findings in the latest issues of the Hampshire Field Club Newsletter. In an inventory of 1627 in the Hampshire Record Office, he has located a reference to "Edward Ranger late of Harbourough alias Bolderlodge within the parish of Minstead" a clear identification of the lost lodge with the area we now know as Bolderwood. In fact, it turns out that Hatheburgh is one of those sites discovered by the New Forest Section of the Field Club as long ago as 1972 when Cornish slate was found within the remains of a typical square lodge enclosure. Unfortunately, much of the site of Hatheburgh has been destroyed by later human activity but a small part remains undamaged and it seems that some of the buildings may also survive outside the enclosure. But at least the greatest of the Forest's mediaeval lodges has now emerged from obscurity.