

New Forest Notes – October 1994

VILLAGES FOR SALE

THE village of Fritham, which usually seems preoccupied with such important matters as pigs, ponies and community events, has had its historic roots stirred. One hundred and sixteen years ago this month, more than half the village was put up for sale by auction, an event of which no memory seems to have survived and which only came to light by the discovery of a set of auction particulars in an antiquarian bookshop.

Auction particulars of those times were very different from the bland productions of modern day estate agents. In 1837, Messrs Rogers and Chapman were not terrorised by the prospect of misrepresentation suits or the sanitising affects of the Estate Agents Act. The particulars are a work of art including a map of the village over two feet square, hand coloured in five different pastel tints and with a decorative title in four ornamental type faces.

The one hundred and thirty acres and several houses were offered for sale in five lots and the auctioneers "especially invite the attention of Trustees, Capitalists, Investors and Residential Purchasers." All the property was offered complete with tenants, then presumably regarded as an asset rather than the encumbrance they would represent today. Security of tenure for tenants then lay far in the future. In the case of one lot comprising four acres, a residence an outbuildings and two cottages the agents offered the opinion that the annual rent of £94 was "totally inadequate".

The prices obtained are not recorded, except for one lot bought by the former owner of the particulars whose purchase is recorded in the memorandum of sale. Harry Cooper of Ironshill Lodge, Lyndhurst, secured five acres for the then very considerable sum of £555. Land in Fritham was already extremely valuable.

Unfortunately the particulars are silent as to the identity of the vendor, although I think it is almost certain that it was the Compton family who were selling, as they certainly owned a good deal of land in the village in the middle of the 19th Century and their name does not appear on the particulars of the adjoining owners.

So great has been the interest in the village that fine coloured photocopies of the map have been selling well and should look very attractive when framed.

Fritham is not the only Forest village to have been sold up, even if it was one of the earliest such auctions in the area. I have seen similar particulars for large parts of Minstead, Canterton, Hale and the "new" villages of Norley and Bull Hill sold by the Crown. All, however, are dwarfed by the massive auction of half a dozen villages which took place over three days in July, 1919, as the Somerly Estate offered for sale not far short of eight thousand acres. The auction included large parts of the New Forest such as Rockford, Ibsley and Gorley Commons and the enclosed land was sold with extensive common right over these areas. However, most of the common land, then regarded as worthless, remained unsold as potential purchasers failed to recognise that within a few decades the gravel beds they contained could have made them multi-millionaires.

Tightening Forestry Commission Rules

At the Verderers Court in September, the Deputy Surveyor announced the tightening of two rules affecting commoners in the Forest. The first concerns the ancient privilege (not right) of turning

out breeding sows at times of the year outside the autumn pannage season. This year the season started on September the 26th will run for the usual sixty days. Thereafter all pigs are supposed to be removed from the Forest.

By tradition however, breeding sow which have been paid for during the pannage season and which return to their owners holdings each night and which do not cause trouble, are allowed to remain on the Forest by permission of the Crown. This was a concession much valued by the commoners of old who usually kept one or two pigs in the Forest close to home. In recent times, however, the number of such very small operators has declined almost to the point of extinction. The privilege has become the excuse for a certain amount of abuse involving marauding pigs of all types wandering about the Forest miles from their owners holdings.

Now the Deputy Surveyor will require anyone seeking to exercise the "Breeding Sows privilege" to obtain a written permit from the Forestry Commission. It, follows, of course, that the permit of any misbehaving pig will be withdrawn. In laying down this requirement, he is clearly within his rights and the move is likely to be welcomed by pig sufferers. Owners who have to endure the paperwork are likely to be less enthusiastic. It is one thing to dictate new rules covering centuries old tradition but quite another matter enforcing them.

The second tightening of Forest regulations is far more controversial and concerns ponies grazing Within the Inclosures of the Forest. The Inclosures are timber plantations made by the Forestry Commission and its predecessors on land taken from the commons under Acts of Parliament dating from 1698 to 1949. They are not the absolute property of the Crown and the rights of the commoner over them are not extinguished, but merely suspended during the time that the Inclosures remain fenced. As soon as the fences are removed, the animals may return. The purpose of the fences is to prevent the young trees from becoming pony meals.

Over the past three hundred years, it has been fairly common to find ponies within the fenced Inclosures of the Forest, greatly to the annoyance of the silvicultural authorities. Every half century or so, these authorities become, fed up with the problem and launch a campaign against the commoners who they portray as being the culprits. The commoners in the past (as now) have, denied that the problem has anything to do with them, blaming the Forest authorities for failing to maintain fences and gates and timber contractors, walkers, riders and even Forestry Commission staff for leaving gates open.

Sometimes, the Commission has tried impounding animals found within the Inclosures and imposing arbitrary "fines" on the owners. The legality of such action has always been challenged by the Verderers. Now the plan is to use byelaw powers which make it an offence to turn ponies into the Inclosure or to allow them to remain there. In response, the Court has made it clear that it will support the Deputy Surveyor in any prosecution where he can prove that animals have been put into a plantation by their owner, but here agreement is likely to end.

I can see why, fifty years ago, before the Forest was surrounded by fences and grids there might have been some slight advantage to confining animals within an Inclosure. Today there is not really much to be gained beyond a little extra poor quality feed and, probably, quite a lot of trouble. Anyone who uses the Forest regularly will know how often the gates are fixed open by all classes of

user. Similarly, although maintenance has improved this year, there are still numerous gates which it is quite impossible to shut. I know of one with no catch which swings open to allow pony access. It is within a few hundred yards of a Forestry Commission Keepers cottage and it has been in that condition for well over six months.

It is difficult to believe that this latest assault on pony owners is not designed chiefly to cover shortcomings in the management of the Inclosures. Not surprisingly the commoners are unhappy that the Commission contents itself with "warning" persistent offenders who throw out poisonous refuse from their gardens while threatening pony owners who are largely innocent, with legal action.

New Grazing Incentive Scheme

For some years past, the turning out of the ponies, so vital to the landscape and ecology of the Forest, has received financial support from English Nature, the Countryside Commission and the Forestry Commission. The scheme has helped New Forest farming during a difficult period and has arrested the fall in pony numbers which was becoming apparent in the 1980s. However, because it depended upon the entry of individual animals and subsequent inspections which involved tracking them down in the Forest, to say nothing of the paperwork involved, it was far from ideal. Worst still it required considerable amounts of the agisters time during a period of the year when their other duties were particularly urgent and demanding - the early spring.

Now the "Premium Scheme" is to be replaced with incentive payments made on all ponies for which marking fees have been paid. These payments will be increased or decreased as necessary each year so as to encourage the maintenance of a desirable target population of ponies on the Forest. The sum available for incentive payments and the target population will be fixed annually at the same time as the marking fees for the coming year are determined. In order to discourage the keeping of ponies which find it difficult to live on the Forest, one unit of incentive payment will be deducted from the sum due to a commoner in respect to each mare he is required to remove from the Forest because of its condition. The new scheme was approved by the Verderers on September 19th and will run from November 1st, 1994, initially for one year. The marking fee and anticipated level of incentive payments will be assessed at the November Court.