

New Forest Notes – October 1996

Not the Queen's Forest

News that Her Majesty has been considering funding the Royal Family from the income of the Crown Estate rather than from the Civil List raises some intriguing questions in relation to the New Forest. Could the Queen seize the camping fees from Hollands Wood or the proceeds of felling in Island Thorns Inclosure? Perhaps more to the point, would she want to take on the deficit which the overall management of the Forest involves? These questions spring from the enduring myth of this still being the Queens "royal" Forest. Sadly for those who cling to this romantic notion, there seems no prospect of such a change in management. We are stuck with the thoroughly prosaic Minister of Agriculture as landowner and dictator of policy, like it or not.

If we go back three centuries, there certainly was a time when the sovereign had a direct interest in the financial proceeds of the royal forests. The story of how that state of affairs came to an end was told by the solicitor to the Office of Woods during an enquiry into the New Forest in 1875 and is of considerable interest.

During the time of the Stuarts and also in the reign of William III, the sovereign tended to grant parts of the Crown Estate at will, often to the annoyance of Parliament. In Queen Anne's reign, therefore, an Act of Parliament prohibited grants for more than 51 years or three lives, although until George II's time the monarch continued to receive the rents of the Crown lands in addition to the Civil List. George, however, surrendered the rents in return for an increase in the Civil List and the arrangement then reached was effectively renewed on each accession thereafter. By an Act of George IV, the New Forest and the other Crown lands were put under the control of the Commissioners of Woods and Forests who paid over the net income to the Consolidated Fund. Succeeding sovereigns, it seems, had the right to demand the rents presumably in place of the Civil List, but none had done so.

In the solicitor's view, the king or queen would have had no right to meddle in the management of the New Forest. The Commissioners were, he said, in the same position as the trustees of a settled estate. They had been appointed by Parliament and only Parliament could remove them. They had sole responsibility for management. However, his views were never to be tested because, in 1923, the New Forest was transferred (effectively sold) to the Forestry Commissioners, with compensation directed to be paid to the Consolidated Fund I have never seen the transfer deed, but it used to be rumoured that the Crown still retained some residual interest in the proceeds of felling timber planted before 1923. Whether or not there is any truth in this, I do not know.

The New Forest continued to belong to the Forestry Commission until 1945 when it became the property of the Minister of Agriculture, but was put by him at the disposal of the Commission, subject to any directions the Minister might see fit to give from time to time. Such directions were, for example, given at the time of the hardwood fellings in 1971. This system of ownership and control remains unaltered at the present day.

Those who occasionally write to the Queen complaining about Forest pony management, the felling of timber or archaic Verderers, are thus shooting at the wrong target. The old royal Forest is dead and buried along with its ancient laws and traditions, the last remnants of which were swept away by Parliament in 1971. We live in and fight over a colourless "state" Forest. There is now no chance of seeing royal footmen collecting camping fees or Her Majesty ejecting Forestry Commission office staff from the former royal bedrooms of the Queen's House.

The Bedlam Forest

The recent survey carried out for the Countryside Commission into the tranquility or otherwise of the New Forest is among the more interesting of the endless stream of reports into this or that aspect of the Forest. I cannot pretend that it tells us anything very new — certainly nothing which is not obvious to those familiar with the Forest — but even the obvious can be illuminating when set down in black and white for the first time.

The survey grades all the land in the Forest and its fringe areas from "tranquil" to "disturbed". Five categories are identified with the quietest areas (of minimal extent) virtually free from close human disturbance, and the worst (comprising substantial parts of the Forest) saturated by traffic noise, development and intrusive recreation. The disturbed areas dominate the Forest, including wide corridors along the main roads and around settlements. Only two areas are regarded as being really quiet. The first of these comprises almost entirely private land in and around the southern part of the Beaulieu Estate. This is very nice for those fortunate enough to live there, but means little for the Forest as a whole. The second area is north of the A51 where there is potential for a large tranquil zone. Indeed, ten years ago it was exactly that, but has now been fragmented by cycle routes which the surveyors found have significantly affected the whole area south west of Fritham. There are two other quiet areas — one south west of Hurley and the other, very surprisingly, adjoining the huge camp at Round Hill and the model aircraft flying zone. I must admit that in this latter area it is difficult to understand exactly how the classification has been arrived at.

Other relatively quiet areas have been plotted in the Lyndhurst, Brockenhurst and Beaulieu triangle and in fragmentary patches across the remainder of the Forest. By far the worst disturbed area is shown on the maps as the huge corridor centred on the A51 road.

The survey has endeavoured to reflect the effects of all forms of human interference and has given some rather questionable weighting in certain areas. For example, the presence of the 400 kv power line across the north of the Forest is classed as having the same effect as a road carrying between 5,000 and 10,000 vehicles a day. This, to my mind, is quite absurd. The line is undoubtedly hideous and in damp weather emits a low noise, but to equate it to the disturbance of the Forest by the A35 at Markway is very strange. The surveyors regard the same power line as more damaging than the B3080 road with its incessant heavy lorry traffic using the Pound Bottom dump.

A further doubt as to the weighting must arise when considering the effects on the Forest of traffic noise as opposed to direct human damage. A good example of this can be found in the A31 corridor. Here there are very few human access points onto the Forest. As a consequence, although the noise is appalling, there is relatively little litter, fouling, erosion or disturbance of wildlife more than a few yards from the road fences. Human depredation is caged and contained within the road reservation. Conversely, part of the surroundings of Fritham Aerodrome, overrun by people and very filthy, is shown as relatively tranquil. From such an area, wildlife is driven out at peak recreational periods while in the "disturbed" A31 corridor deer continue to graze in Buckherd Bottom, and Pinnick Wood is relatively clean and peaceful apart from the roar of the A31.

Leaving these criticisms aside, the overall picture presented by the report is a valuable if depressing one. In a Forest with a thousand year history, almost all the damage portrayed has occurred within the last century — most of it in the last thirty years. However, the really sad part is that there are no signs that any practical action will be taken to reverse the trend. For example, earthwork screen barriers for sound and vision were tested west of Stoney Cross on the south side of the A31 some years ago. They have proved very useful in reducing disturbance from the road. At fairly modest cost they could be extended right across the Forest, effectively wiping out the road from a visual point of view and much reducing noise penetration. Similarly, damaging recreational pressures which have sprung up in the last few years could be controlled at virtually no cost. In both cases, understanding and the will to take action is lacking. It is easier to go on producing reports.

Dying Heathland

Last month's National Heathland Conference based at Rhinefield Hotel was attended by experts from all over the country, including many local people. On the second day, delegates were offered a choice of tour — either the New Forest or the heathlands of North East Hampshire. Not surprisingly, all but a handful, including the locals, chose the former. That was a pity because they did not see, as I did, the striking contrast between heathland management in the New Forest and that elsewhere in the county.

The north Hampshire heaths are in large part overgrown and depressing. They are surrounded by urban development and dominated by noise. Desperate and inadequately funded attempts are being made to chip away at the encroaching scrub here and there, but the work is amateurish compared to that done in the Forest. The scientists squabble amongst themselves as to the best methods of management, ignoring the potential aesthetic qualities of the heathland and forgetting that it was created by agriculture and can only properly be maintained by that process. At each stop, earnest young countryside managers enthused over the presence of some obscure rare creature in a corner of their patch while remaining apparently oblivious to the piles of rubbish, dog fouling and dereliction which surrounded them on all sides.

By comparison, the Forestry Commission's physical management of the Forest's heaths is outstandingly successful and efficient, even allowing for the fact that they have six thousand of the commoners' animals to help them. In Woolmer Forest we were shown an attempt to re-establish

grazing, in which the farmer is paid £25 per head per month for the use of his cattle. At that rate perhaps we shall see a mass migration of commoners from the New Forest.

Those ruined heaths are the proof of how essential the commoners' animals are to the survival of the New Forest. Their grazing, together with the Commission's expertise and skilled labour force has made the New Forest a superb example of how lowland heath should be managed.