

New Forest Notes – October 1997

Commerce in the Forest

At the Verderers Court in September, the Forestry Commission's land agent (on behalf of the Deputy Surveyor) asked for permission to sell a variety of goods at some camp sites throughout the Forest. It was very much a retrospective application because a thriving trade has been going on for a great many years past covering everything from tent pegs to children's toys. At first the sales caused little complaint, but for several years now there have been rumblings of discontent from local traders. They see the camp shops (the Commission prefers to call them wardens offices) as bleeding off trade which is rightfully theirs. That is hotly denied by the Commission which believes that its camping operations bring immense trade to the Forest and that on-site sales are very minor and largely confined to emergency supplies for those arriving late at night or ill-equipped. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the argument, trading has been going on for a long time with no clear permission from the Verderers Court. That permission is necessary by law before the Forestry Commission is entitled to establish shops on its camp sites.

In July the Verderers indicated that they would allow (specifically at Ocknell) sales of bread, milk, batteries, tent pegs and freezer packs, but nothing else. These items it was felt either do not travel well or are genuine emergency supplies. That did not at all suit the Forestry Commission and the September presentment sought to expand the list to include gas, gas mantles, toilet fluid, washing powder, maps, guides, BBQ fuel, children's toys, bottled water, string, soap, toothpaste and tin openers. At Ocknell the Commission also wants to sell a "small" range of foodstuffs. The Ocknell argument is supported by the rather unconvincing claim that the site might have to close without this additional facility. Since the occupants of the site come almost exclusively by motor vehicle it is difficult to believe that they cannot find the local shop at Bramshaw or the shopping centre of Lyndhurst. Equally weak is the claim that camp shops are necessary to control traffic movements and congestion. How many people forget about their car once they've found their camping pitch? With or without shopping as an objective, I imagine that most of them drive about every day of their holiday.

For the Verderers the important question is not so much the sales themselves as the degree to which it is right for the Court to interfere in commerce, supporting one trader or group of traders against another. Sympathy inevitably, must be with the struggling shop keeper, but is that necessarily a proper ground for the exercise of the Verderers powers? Fortunately, this is not really an issue which has to be determined. Significant sales on campsites are so clearly in conflict with the peace and character of the Forest that the trading ambitions of the Forestry Commission seems likely to fail on this ground alone -- leaving the claims of local shops satisfied by an indirect route. That, at least is my prediction of the likely response to the

Forestry Commission's presentment, but the Court will make up its own mind in November after receiving supporting and counter presentments.

In a rather more obscure way, the Verderers' influence on commerce is also under consideration over pony premiums. Premiums (euphemism for subsidies) have long been paid to ensure the continued stocking of the Forest with adequate numbers of animals. The expert Illingworth Committee had intended that they should be paid irrespective of breed. The subsidy was to animal mouths, not to mouths of a particular class or type. This meant that so long as the pony was in good bodily condition, subsidy was paid whether the animal was a Shetland, a so called "coloured pony" or a true blue registered New Forest pony. A list of non-registered ponies receiving subsidy was maintained by the Commoners Defence Association so long as annual applications were necessary. Latterly the subsidy has been paid direct without the need for time consuming paperwork in applying each year.

Next year a new super subsidy will be paid at much higher rates to the best mares running on the Forest, partly funded by European money. There are two schools of thought as to how this should be distributed. The first says that it should go only to registered New Forest ponies as that is what the Europe intended. The Verderers should, by doing this, practise positive discrimination in favour of the New Forest breed in an attempt to boost a flagging market which has hit registered ponies quite as much as others. There are also fears that the Pony Breeding Society's income may be affected if registrations fall through subsidies going to unregistered stock. Why bother to pay a registration fee if subsidy is available without it and registration is no guarantee of a higher sale price?

The contrary argument is that it is not the Verderers business to influence the commercial practises of pony breeders and that a skewbald mare in good condition and of good conformation is just as worthy recipient of subsidy as a registered pony. It is probably also, to the disgust of the purist, more valuable than a registered mare. To the general public, of course, the skewbald is a Forest pony and the argument is too abstruse to be worth pursuing. I remember the horror expressed in pony breeding circles when the New Forest Visitor Centre was found to be displaying a picture of coloured under the heading "New Forest Ponies". Then the Ordnance Survey did the same thing on the cover of its Outdoor Leisure Map. Anyhow, whatever the public's view on the matter, the subject is of intense interest to specialists and a sub-committee of the Verderers will report with recommendations in October.

Parking Curtailed

Over the last few weeks there has been a lot of unheralded activity in parts of the Forest, apparently directed at eliminating informal roadside parking areas. For example, at Homey Ridge there was a barrier gate set back from the road allowing parking for about four cars. More often than not, some of these spaces were filled. This has now been ditched and the

barrier moved right up to the road. Similar works have been undertaken at Howen Bottom while a large dogwalking informal park at Godshill Inclosure has been closed down. All this work is highly desirable if its sole purpose is to prevent erosion, control the spread of litter and filth and confine cars to the proper parks. However, I wonder why it is being done now, twenty years after the car free zones were made and after repeated refusals to tackle the problem in the past. A suspicious mind might conclude that it is a subtle preliminary to a fresh application for car parking charges.

Grazing Licences

Very occasionally (and the September Court was such an occasion) the Verderers receive an application to depasture stock on the Forest under licence. This is a curious procedure allowing someone who has no rights of common the privilege of grazing his animals in the Forest in exactly the same manner as a true commoner, but at a rate of payment much higher than the current marking fee. The marking fee is of course, the payment made by the commoners to the Verderers, largely for the services of the agisters. The issuing of a licence is entirely at the Verderers' discretion and is unlikely unless the applicant is known to be a suitable person, usually recommended by the agister for the area. The applicant must also own or rent sufficient land to manage the stock off the Forest in case of an emergency and he must live and farm close to the Forest.

The number of people turning out under licence has always been very small, chiefly because so much land in and around the Forest carries common rights. The usually quoted figure is 65,000 acres although this takes no account of rights on the Adjacent Commons. Even a nominal tenancy of a small portion of land with rights qualifies a person as a commoner and avoids the relatively heavy licence charge.

The origin of these grazing licences goes back over one hundred years when a special Act of Parliament was passed (1879), supposedly to help small commoners who had failed to register their rights over the Forest a few years earlier. In fact it is more likely that the Act was passed because all sorts of people who had no rights had been allowed by the Office of Woods to turn out. The Act was necessary to sort out the resulting disorderly state of affairs in the Forest, but remains today as a useful access to the Forest for those whose land carries no rights.

I read somewhere that a potential candidate for a part of the old New Forest constituency had recently answered a question on the Forest, but at the same time had suggested that questioners might do better to concentrate on national issues. That seemed to me to have been an injudicious remark. I am sure that most voters still make up their minds on the basis of national policies, but the New Forest is not just any constituency- it has a character and "national" importance of its own. Moreover, as distinctions in national politics become increasingly blurred, there must be a growing number of people (like me) who for the first

time in their lives are approaching a general election without fixed voting intentions. Perhaps only a few hundred of them would actually decide which way to vote on the basis of a candidate's attitude to the Forest. In the old days of multi-thousand majorities, they could have been ignored with safety. Now those few hundred might make the difference between success and failure. Whether one loved, hated or was indifferent to the party politics of our last two MPs, there can be no dispute that they understood and worked hard for the New Forest, as the Forest, and not just any constituency. In the case of Sir Oliver Crosthwaite-Eyre, this was due to instinct a long family tradition, while with our present MP it was more probably as a result of education in the office, although none the worse for that.

In the years since the war, New Forest MPs have had to deal with three New Forest Acts, an abortive New Forest Bill, with Countryside Act, the Wild Creatures and the Forest Law and the Lyndhurst bypass Bill. In other words, there has been almost one piece of legislation affecting the Forest every seven years or so. As the conflict between the protecting the Forest and abandoning it to unrestrained recreational use intensifies, I can see no likelihood of this sequence coming to an end and that takes no account of such matters as whether or not to ban hunting, another attempt to turn the Forest onto a national park, or allegedly commercial policies of the Forest Commission.

It is, of course, very easy for the any candidate simply to climb on the bandwagon for instinctive public opposition to car parking charges or whatever unpopular management policy (good or bad) the Forestry Commission may be advocating at a particular moment. Most of them seem to be doing it.

I suspect that some of them may have no understanding of the issues and merely see odd cheap vote in attacking the Commission's plans. In the past things were different. Our MPs earned respect by, in the latest Forestry Commission jargon, " putting the Forest first", irrespective of the fact that they were following an unpopular line at that time. Sir Oliver's championing of the New Forest Bill in 1963 and the Sir Patrick's opposition to the Lyndhurst bypass Bill and the national park proposals were good example. With the election only a few weeks away, I cannot even remember the names of the main parties candidates in my own portion of the divided constituency. It may be too early, but I have received nothing in the post from any of them, no visits from canvassers, and I have heard of no meetings locally. Perhaps I should regard myself as very lucky! I certainly know nothing of their attitude to the Forest and the day to day local issues so important to the many people who live and farm here. If there are others like me, it does seem that an opportunity is being missed by all the main candidates, or perhaps they simply don't care.

Life Money

The Forest is waiting for the outcome of a joint application by a group of local bodies for European funding amounting to several millions pounds. The application is to a source of

money called the Life Fund. If it is successful, it is to be spent on all sorts of good work including, in the Verderers' case, a special premium (cash subsidy) for really good ponies running on the Forest. Unfortunately there have been rumours that one or two of the projects included in the bid are, to say at least, rather odd. The whole matter has also been difficult to investigate. In the light of the rumours, I asked for details of what was included in the bid. A copy of a bland and useless summary was the result. I then called at the offices of New Forest Committee (which has been dealing with the paper work) and asked if details of the application were available to the public. I was told that the information was freely available, but that one or two figures which might prejudice some land purchase negotiations were " sensitive". The young lady to whom I spoke said that she would delete these figures and send on to me a copy of the remainder later that day . That seemed perfectly reasonable, so I waited - for two weeks. After that time I asked the Clerk to the Verderers to investigate and a further long silence followed.

Eventually, I discovered that a meeting had been held and that it had been decided that the information was not quite so public as had at first been suggested. An editing process was being carried out to make the details suitable (perhaps worthless) for public consumption. Without knowing exactly what is included in the bid it is difficult to know what is behind all this. Fees paid to private individuals, hourly rates and so on might, I suppose, be regarded as confidential, but we are dealing with expenditure of huge sums of public money (albeit European money), to be undertaken largely by public authorities . There is something rather disturbing in the degree of secrecy which seems to be surrounding the whole affair. Surely it is reasonable to know how much money is to be spent on, for example, rhododendron clearance and how many acres are to be cleared.

Turf Hill

Ever since the great storm of 1990 blew down a large part of Turf Hill Inclosure, There has been a battle going on to secure its proper restoration to heathlands. Several years ago a landscaping plan was produced and felling has been going on sporadically ever since. However, the real problem (recorded in these notes in 1995) was the deep ridge and furrow ploughing which was done in preparation for timber planting in 1960s and which had made the land permanently inaccessible to walkers and riders. The difficulty of course, was cost,. Levelling of the ruts for return to heathland is an expensive business but quite essential, if the protection of the Forest is a priority of management. It was one of those long-running battles in which the Verderers worry way at the Forestry Commission in private month after month, and for which they seldom receive much credit. In December of last year the Commission finally agreed that something had to be done and proposed treatment for a trial near the Turf Hill car park. The Verderers were told most firmly that they were not to expect action overnight. Despite this, in February, a large tracked excavator equipped with a root forked turned up and spent the next few weeks crawling about pushing up brash, removing tree

stumps and destroying the ruts. The trial plot has been left level and clean of debris. The work is a credit to the Commission staff who organised it and to the skilled work of the anonymous driver of the machine. It is only a start, however, because large areas of the felled plantation adjoining remain unrestored, but it shows what can be done. The precedent is of great importance because pressure is on the Forestry Commission to return many of the called "Verderers Inclosures" to open Forest. These plantations were made in the 1960s by destroying heathland- just before its importance as a rare habitat and its landscape value were generally recognised. All of them were deeply ploughed in the same manner and, as they are cleared, that ploughing is going to be expensive to restore. Turf Hill has proved that there are no insuperable practical difficulties in doing it.

E. Coli 0157

Last week I watched a group of village children playing on Hatchet Green as their predecessors have undoubtedly done for centuries. Lying down enjoying the first spring sunshine, chewing the cud and watching the children, was a group of cows. Hatchet Green is overlooked by the village primary school and is used by it as a semi- official playground and sports field without, I hope too much inconvenience to either the junior sportsmen or the cows. However, the latter produce what television reports on abattoirs call animal faeces and the rest of us call dung. Vigorous football games, quarrels and falls bring the children and the dung piles into inevitable and intimate contact. With learned scientists saying that on school farm visits children should not be allowed even to touch the animals, one wonders if we are about to see wholesale infection of the New Forest and visiting the children with the fashionable but unpleasant E. coli 0157. I asked a bacteriologist how it was that past generations of rural children had not been wiped out or seriously damaged by this scourge. I was not even sure how I survived as a child , remembering the family dung-collecting outings in the Forest to feed the wartime vegetable plot. It seems that the 0157 strain is a relatively recent variation of one line of E. Coli family of bacteria, other harmless strains of which, as she put it, " we are all carrying internally " in any case. It would therefore seem one more factor to be considered by the families bringing young children to the Forest to play - along with adder bites, kicking ponies, toxacara infection from dogs fouling and the occasional wandering maniac.